

Business Communications – Empathy is the key

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Motivations behind Communication

We communicate to coordinate and convince, to suggest, and to inform. All communications are motivated by the need or desire for some kind of response. They are attempts to get people to do something that we want done, like purchase a product, stop talking, make a decision, or agree to a dinner date.

Successful communications are ones in which the desired outcome is achieved and the audience reacts to the message in the intended way.

Example Communication

A simple example is emailing a brief note to a colleague asking for the answer to a technical question.

This communication would be considered successful if the colleague replied with the desired information in a timely manner. It would be unsuccessful if there were no reply, if the reply did not come soon enough, or if the response did not provide the correct answer.

What is the most important thing we can do to help ensure the success of this communication? We need to make it as easy as possible for the audience (the colleague) to do what we want, when we want it.

We need to be empathetic. We must craft the communication from the audience's perspective. Thinking from their perspective ensures that communications meet the information and motivational needs of the audience so that they can in turn fulfill our needs by responding the way we want.

Pathway

Effective communications begin with a clearly defined purpose. You need to know why you are communicating and what you want, before it is possible to decide what to include in a communication.

The next big step is to figure out how to convince the audience to cooperate; how to get them to do what you want. Great communicators are "customer-centric." They sell their purpose to the audience. They deliver what the audience needs in order to encourage cooperation.

Well crafted communications deliver what the audience needs in as clear and concise a manner as possible. They make the best use of the audience's time.

Communication Mistakes

In our earlier example of a communication between colleagues, there are many things that a "self-centered" communicator might overlook that would decrease the chances of success.

For example, the return address could be incorrect, making it more work for the audience to respond - and therefore less likely to do so. The question could be badly worded so that the audience is not sure how to answer the question. The desired timing of the response could be left vague. Or the message might be sent but not actually received by the audience.

Paying attention to the ways in which a communication can go wrong is how we ensure success. You need to know your audience and to incorporate this information into your communications in order to get what you want from them.

Quality Control

Which is more important: technical communication skills (careful grammar, clever PowerPoint slides, or eloquent speech) or knowledge about your audience? Which is more likely to lead to successful communications?

The answer is debatable, but I would suggest that knowing who you are communicating with is more important than knowing how to communicate. Of course you always need some of both. It is important to be able to write and speak clearly, but these skills are less fundamental to ultimate success than knowledge about what the audience will want in order to cooperate with your communications.

The message is more important than the medium. An intimate knowledge of your audience is more likely to lead to success than an intimate knowledge of grammar or public speaking.

Audiences judge the content and relevance of communications from their own perspective and act accordingly. As a consequence, knowing the needs and interests of your audience is fundamental to crafting a message that will produce the desired results.

Conclusion

So, you want to be a better communicator. Be empathetic. Think strategically. Deliver what the audience will need in order to do what you want. Convince them to cooperate by giving them the information that is necessary to motivate them and that makes it easy for them to do what you want.

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