

Communication From The Top

The business climate today demands that you be skilled at communication if you want to be a leader in business. Here's some ideas about how to polish your verbal style:

Lack of communication skill is the largest reason executives are derailed on the way to the top or struggle to succeed once there. Stories about the downfall of leaders who don't learn the art of professional relationships are becoming common. It's not good enough any more to be good at your job. Today you also have to be good at dealing with the people who make up your workplace.

Customers and employees increasingly demand good communication skills from management. Research indicates that 80% of a typical supervisory or management job involves handling conflict with employees. The tension between productivity and good relationships with subordinates can be a real pressure cooker. Some days, managers may seriously consider placing themselves in the out-basket or faxing themselves to sunnier shores rather than dealing with one more personnel problem.

Since most of us never were trained in dealing with people problems in our education, many executives turn to executive coaches to give them real advice for dealing with real people in the real world of work.

Here are five tips I teach that will give you an edge as a leader:

- 1. Start your sentences with the word "I."** When you say "Fred, I really needed that report on my desk" rather than "Fred, you didn't get that report to me again," you reduce defensiveness, increase cooperation, and speak with authority. When you use "I language," you make it clear you are describing your own experience and not blaming the other person.
- 2. Be specific and describe behavior when you talk about a problem.** Don't say, "Mary, you are not a team player," say, "Mary, I've noticed you've been late frequently to our planning meetings. The team can't start until you arrive." In business, we often use words like "respect" or "trust" without defining what behavior we want. Many conflicts in organizations result from vague language. When you describe specific behavior, the person knows what you want changed and doesn't feel like you're throwing insults.
- 3. Repeat in your own words the message you've just heard.** When we listen, we often misunderstand what other people have said. By repeating in your own words what has been communicated, you increase rapport with the speaker and clarify any distortions. The best times to echo another person's sentences are during a conflict, when you want to increase trust or clarify agreements. If you believe someone has misunderstood you when you speak, tell him or her you are not sure you have been clear and request he or she repeat back what they heard. In this situation, calmly tell the speaker that you realize you're not always a good listener and that repeating back his or her words is a way to understand them better. Most people will not froth at the mouth and say, "*No!* don't do that, I hate it when people understand me."

4. **Resolve conflicts at the earliest possible moment.** Conflicts don't go away, they go underground like toxic waste. Unfortunately, the morale, motivation, and productivity of an organization also get buried when differences aren't discussed. When you resolve a conflict, allow the other person to fully state his or her view of the problem first. Resist the natural response of defending yourself. Instead, respond by mirroring back what the other person has said.
5. **Learn to ask questions when you are angry.** Remember television detective Columbo? He always solved the case by benignly asking effective and frequent questions. He never attacked, accused, or asked questions in a hostile tone. When we're angry, we tend to jump to conclusions and try to solve problems based on insufficient data. When you stay calm, breathe, and ask questions, you can often solve the problem without escalating the conflict.

As you develop these communication skills, try to remember that most of us learned our communication habits from our families. Our communication patterns are automatic and include both effective and ineffective behaviors. Unless your family was extraordinary in communicating, using these five tips will feel abnormal at first. The more unnatural they feel during a communication, the more you are utilizing your new skills.

Skilled communication, like any new habit, feels awkward until it is practiced. So the next time someone stomps into your office, relax and view the situation as an opportunity to communicate well and differentiate yourself in your industry as a leader with an interpersonal edge.

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