

How to solve workplace communication problems

By Shari Frisinger

Meetings that drag on, team frustration from lack of direction, important issues being pushed to the side – do these situations sound familiar? When time is wasted, directions are unclear, and re-work is costly, it usually means one thing: a lack of clear communication. Unfortunately, organizations of all sizes experience this issue.

To strengthen your operation, you need to learn how to effectively listen and communicate. The best thing is it won't cost you money! You simply need time and focus.

Many times in a conversation, *we* are in tune with the other person, but they are not granting us the same courtesy. Whether intentional or not, these cause barriers in our conversations. How do we maintain a professional/productive communication while addressing the issue at hand?

Here are a few of examples of complicated communication issues, and solutions on how to respond:

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No grey allowed

Definition: when someone interprets a situation as clearly either [a] or [b]. In their mind, there is no other option or grey area.

Example: The department policy is to not pay employees for mileage. If, however, the employee picks up catering or something else needed for a meeting, mileage will be paid. Employee Sally picks up catering and submits for what is seen as a high mileage expense. When she is asked about it, her response is “OK then, I won't submit any more expenses – I'll use my own gas to get whatever is needed.”

Response: “Sally that's not what I'm saying. I really appreciate your picking up these items. We all work together as a team and rely on each other to do these things. It's just with the cost of gas rising, going far out of our way to pick up something that is comparable and can be purchased closer is what we need to do.”

“Not a big deal”

Definition: the challenge you are experiencing is not taken seriously by the other person, usually an authority figure. He uses pseudo-optimism to try and placate you so you will leave him alone.

Example: “With these changes to the next meeting, I won't be able to get prepared for the one after that as they are nearly back-to-back.” He says: “Sure you can ... the changes aren't that extensive and you know exactly what you're doing. Plus you have such a way with people!”

Response: Ask if you have his undivided attention. Repeat your original statement more firmly. Ask specifically for help in solving this problem.

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Resisting/boxing

Definition: When someone wants to debate a topic for the sake of debating or challenges what you say.

Example: Anybody have good recommendations for hotels in Billings MT?

Salesperson #1: The Marriott is the best place to stay.

Salesperson #2: No way – I stayed there once and won't stay again. The Hilton is much better.

Salesperson #1: I've never stayed at the Hilton there.

Salesperson #2: Well you should – your hotel doesn't have nearly the same amenities or level of service as....

Response: The best thing to do is to acknowledge the other person's perspective and end the conversation gracefully.

He enjoys debating and will take whatever you say as an indication that you, too, want to debate this point. He may not understand that it's OK to have differing opinions.

Problem-solving mode

Definition: When the person you are talking with immediately feels she has to solve your problem. There are other reasons you may be communicating (to vent, to work out a problem, to share a triumph, etc.). What you are looking for from the other person is for her to just listen.

Example: Employee #1: I'm having trouble creating a new sales pitch for the car dealership downtown.

Employee #2: Well, have you thought about their new ad slogan? You can use that to help close the deal ... also keep in mind they seem to like using their company president as spokesperson.

Response: “I understand you want to give me the answers. I think I already fixed the problem, but can you hear me out and let me know what you think of how I handled it?”

These four tactics are just some of the ways we can use to get the conversation back on track. Instead of having meetings ramble on, or allowing miscommunication between employees and leaders, we can all hone our listening and communication skills to make sure we are heard – loud and clear. •

About the Author:

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