SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from August 19, 2005

Meeting of the minds

How to get results from communications with co-workers

Question:

I am a member of the management team at my company. I am the veteran of the group, having worked here 11 years. In the last year, three veterans have left the team and three newcomers have joined. Two of the three new faces are from outside the company, and these two occupy the key roles of president and chief financial officer. We've discussed the need to change things, improve processes, do better by our customers, etc. I guess you wouldn't be too surprised to hear that we've been having some very tense conversations and meetings. We seem to be talking past each other and trying to defend our positions. I leave the meetings frustrated because we talk issues to death and don't get to the point that action can be taken. I want to start doing some of the things we spend hours talking about. What can you advise us to do to get moving?

Answer:

This is an all too common occurrence in my experience in management consulting. It's not just functional work teams that struggle with communication issues, management teams do, too. Given the vantage point they occupy, when a management team is less than effective in its communication and meetings management practices, the repercussions move well beyond the conference room. They are felt organization-wide.

So, this is no small concern, especially in light of the observation that you are forming a team with three new members. You have yet to establish norms and protocols, although you are beginning to set the tone for things with your emphasis on aggressive discussion.

It's time to step back and examine your communication process. It's time to get intentional about the way you want to interact.

For starters, you will want to analyze how you conduct your meetings. In my consulting work, I often work with management teams to implement a four-step model for conducting business meetings.

It looks something like this:

1. What is the goal of the meeting?

Effective teams identify the purpose of the meeting prior to getting started. What do we hope to accomplish? What process will we use? Who will occupy which roles (e.g., facilitator, scribe, process checker, etc.). What criteria will we apply to tell us that we did a good or not-so-good job? Further, for maximum impact, participants need to come to the meeting prepared to work. This means having reviewed pre-work materials, formulated questions, identified relevant resources, etc. Spending time in this stage pays off later on because the discussion is more targeted and organized.

2. What do we know?

This is stage in which ideas are shared, examined, and explored. The emphasis should be on fact-based or evidence-based discussion. While there is room for offering opinions, the perspectives that are offered are most effective when there is supporting data or information attached. This provides a basis for making objective determinations of the relative worthiness of a given perspective.

3. What should we do?

There comes a point when a decision must be made. Identifying the right solution to pursue is a function of the extent to which the best alternatives have been advanced and objective, explicit criteria are used to decide which way to go. It is often helpful to return to the beginning to reference what the desired end point was. Too often a lack of time (i.e., "We've only got five minutes left") or an overriding need to decide (i.e., "We've talked about this the last three meetings. Can't we make up our minds?") influence or pressure the solution identification process. You can avoid this trap by deciding ahead of time the criteria that you will use to make a decision. By the way, the company's core values are often a helpful lens by which to examine various alternatives along the lines of, "Which alternative is most consistent with our core values?"

4. How did we do?

Too often, it seems, meetings end abruptly because time is up and we have to move along. Just as a hurried start gets the meeting off on poor footing, a rushed ending brings things to an awkward conclusion. Better to spend a few minutes reflecting on what was accomplished. Did we accomplish what we set out to do? Did we do our work effectively? What went well? Not so well? What should we keep doing? Stop doing? Start doing? Who is responsible for the action items identified? Do these people understand what they are supposed to do? When will we meet again? And so on.

In pursuing this model, it is important that you and your colleagues realize that different communication styles exist. Four basic types are possible, as follows:

- **Emotive** (high on sociability and dominance). Emotive types are energetic, enthusiastic, and persuasive. They tend to be cheerleaders and spokespersons.

- **Directive** (high on dominance, low on sociability). Directive types are forceful, assertive, and controlling. They tend to be decision makers and producers.
- **Supportive** (high on sociability, low on dominance). Supportive types are warm, empathetic, and caring. They tend to be harmonizers and conflict resolvers.
- **Reflective** (low on both sociability and dominance). Reflective types are thoughtful, quiet and analytic. They tend to be observers and idea generators.

By recognizing that different styles exist, you can begin to understand what is necessary to meet one another in the middle. You can stop talking past each other by flexing your communication style. This means recognizing who the other party is and how he or she will best receive the information that is to be conveyed. For example, if you are a director talking with a supporter, you will want to couch your message in more personal terms, emphasizing the underlying values and feelings. Adopting a, "Just the facts" approach won't work as well in this context.

To be maximally effective in flexing your communication style, you will want to turn to your communication tool box and see what tools are present. In my experience, there are two general kinds of communication tools, useful tools and harmful tools. Let's look briefly at each of these.

- **Useful tools** Useful tools are tools that help you get your point across, help someone else get his or her point across, and/or advance the collective cause. Examples include speaking from an evidence-based perspective, process checking, clarifying, paraphrasing, offering feedback and reinforcing.
- **Harmful tools** Harmful tools are tools that interfere with your ability to get your point across, inhibit someone else from getting his or her point across, or damage or detract from the collective cause. Examples include acting aggressively or defensively, interrupting, shutting down, avoiding, and mocking or using sarcasm.

I can imagine that you're saying to yourself, "Hey, this is common sense. I know how to run a good meeting. I know how to participate and communicate with other people."

I'm sure you do. But, that's not the issue.

The issue is, if what I discuss in this article is so simple, why aren't you already practicing it?

Take my advice, spend some time getting more serious about your communication process and the skills that attach to it. I think you will find that your management team interactions will improve as a result. And, by extension, I think you will find that interactions you have in your own functional work area/department/division will improve as well.

Daniel Schroeder, Ph.D., of Organization Development Consultants, Inc. (ODC) in Brookfield provides "HR Connection." Small Business Times readers who would like to see an issue addressed in an article may reach him at (262) 827-1901, via fax at (262) 827-8383, via e-mail at schroeder@odcons.com or via the internet at www.odcons.com.