

Send a clear message

How to communicate better with your employees

Question:

Your article on effective meetings in the Aug. 19 issue of *Small Business Times* was one I could connect with. As a manager at my company, I attend way too many meetings. Nothing ever seems to result from them. My impression is that some of the people take communication for granted. They don't realize how much they dominate the conversation or how they come across when they are talking. They assume it's the other person's fault when something is misunderstood. I'd like you to comment some more about the importance of communication and some things we can do to be better communicators.

Answer:

If you've read my articles in *Small Business Times* over the years, you know I feel strongly that communication skills are a foundational element of individual and organizational success. We have only to look at the current business environment

in order to support that perspective. After all, we live in an era characterized by:

- Flattened organizational structures.
- Participative management.
- An emphasis on customer service.
- Increasing diversity in the workforce.

Within this context, the ability to get along is clearly important to individual and organizational success.

It's been my experience, though, that some employees possess better subject matter or technical skills than communication skills. Maybe you've seen the same. An employee is a very talented producer, he or she is very capable at carrying out tasks and getting the work done, but he or she does not relate well to the rest of the work group or to customers. Subject matter expertise often has a lot to do with know-how. It is related to abilities and aptitudes — the kinds of characteristics underlying the concept of general intelligence (i.e., IQ).

Sometimes, because a given employee is such a strong producer, he or she is given responsibility for directing the team or work area. This is often when the lack of communication skills becomes more obvious because to facilitate the work of others, a manager must make use of interpersonal capabilities. These have to do with understanding oneself and others, establishing rapport, communicating effectively, resolving conflicts, etc. In recent years, some researchers have used the terms emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (EQ) in discussing interpersonal acumen.

I raise the issue of IQ vs. EQ because just as some people are right hand dominant and others are left hand dominant, and still others are ambidextrous, people vary with regard to their technical and interpersonal proficiencies. Some people are more capable in one domain than the other. Some are well-equipped in both.

My experience tells me that many

employees enter the workforce with well-grounded technical skills. After all, more and more entering employees hold college degrees. More and more workers hold certifications. People have recognized that to get ahead they must credential themselves.

Yet, at the same time, I have the sense that not too many employees have been thoroughly educated or trained in communication. Think back to your own educational preparation. How many courses in human relations, communications or the behavioral sciences did you complete? If you're like most people, it probably wasn't all that many.

Additionally, I have the feeling that communication skills, or "soft skills" as some people call them, simply are not viewed as being as important as technical or subject matter skills (i.e., hard skills).

Let me use an example to support this last observation. A few years ago, I was facilitating a leadership team through a developmental program. Things were going reasonably well in our sessions, but I began to see that the team's process was one of "intelligent talk" in which there was a lot of information being presented but no resolutions being achieved. One person's comments would give way to the next person's and so on and so on. There was no reinforcing. There was no questioning or clarifying, simply a series of mini presentations that served to consume the allotted time.

When I offered my observations to the team and suggested that we spend time honing the communication skills of participants and specifying a meetings management process, my idea was dismissed as being overreaching. "We know how to communicate. We don't need help in those areas. We need you to help us map out a plan, make better decisions."

The team failed to realize that it was

their communication inadequacies that were holding them back, not their subject matter expertise.

Sound familiar? I bet it does.

So, what are some concrete things for you to do to become better communicators? Here are some quick tips:

Focus on the communication process.

Remember that every communication exchange includes a sender, a message and a receiver. To be maximally effective in getting your point across, you must be receiver-focused.

Be mindful of your communication filters.

We bring a host of biases to our exchanges with others. How we perceive others and how they perceive us can be influenced by emotions, cultural variables, attitudes, expectations, roles, non-verbal cues and a variety of other factors. By paying attention to and checking our biases, we can be more focused on the communication climate before us.

Send clear messages.

As the sender, you can go a long way toward advancing your cause by using simple language, reinforcing your initial message in subsequent messages, choosing

the best moment to present your message and communicating in concert with the receiver's preferences.

Develop active listening skills.

We spend most of our communication time in the listening mode. Ironically, few of us have had any formal training in this most important skill. To become a superior communicator, emphasize the development of excellent listening skills.

Robert Frost observed that, "Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't and the other half who have nothing to say and keep on saying it."

To avoid falling into this trap, reflect on the four suggestions I offered within this article. Then, put them into action and watch the impact they have on your communication outcomes.



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.