

Three High-Impact Communication Strategies Leaders Need To Improve Business Results

Do You Know What They Are?

What would it be worth to you to be confident in your ability to build alliances, negotiate difficult situations and generate win-win solutions, prevent communications breakdowns, improve employee retention, increase company revenues, and vastly improve the quality of work-life in your organization?

Priceless, you say? If so, read on.....

According to the folks at the Harvard Center for Negotiation, 70% of all strategic alliances fail because people can't negotiate the complex relationships that require difficult conversations. It's a truism to say that business is about relationships – be they management-employee, customer or client relations, or strategic partners internal and external. And what are relationships about but communication? High-quality communication is the linchpin to productive work relationships in high-performing teams, organizations and businesses. Yet, how many times do we either approach a conversation or walk away from one wondering whether we've gotten our point across, been understood, or actually reached an agreement that will result in the outcomes we want.

While we learned how to use the vehicles of communication through reading and writing, most of us did not learn the fundamental principles and skills of great verbal communication. Although some of us come by these skills naturally, most importantly, they can be learned by anyone. Continuous improvement for leadership in business can only grow out of conscious communication that promotes productive learning. Where and when you have conscious communication leading to productive conversations that generate learning for all participants, you inevitably get improvement, innovation, growth and evolution.

Communication correlates with productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction and employee retention!

The Gallup organization researched what makes a great workplace in a survey that involved 80,000 managers in a multi-year research project. What this study revealed is that people do not leave companies; they leave bosses and workgroups. The survey, known as the Q12, discovered that there are 12 dimensions that characterize a great workplace. A great workplace, by virtue of fulfilling the 12 identified dimensions, produced employee retention, customer satisfaction, productivity and profitability. Significantly, at least seven of the twelve dimensions reflect a direct correlation of communication and relationships with organizational climate and the four outcomes noted above. They are:

- ✓ I know what is expected of me at work.
- ✓ In the last week, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.

- ✓ My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- ✓ There is someone at work that encourages my development.
- ✓ In the last six months, someone at work has talked with me about my progress.
- ✓ At work, my opinion seems to count.
- ✓ I have a best friend at work.

If we could identify two common threads that weave through these 7 optimizing workplace conditions, we would find that they consist of adequate and appropriate feedback mechanisms within the organization, and effective use of requests and promises.

Create Adequate Feedback Mechanisms in Your Organization

Performance reviews are standard fare yet research shows that most employees feel they do not receive adequate feedback on how they're doing, what's expected, what they need to do to improve, and how to be as successful as they would like. There are many venues through which to give and get feedback – supervisory reporting relationships, 360 assessments, mentoring and coaching relationships.

Giving Effective Feedback:

1. Agree on goals to be achieved and/or performance standards to be met.
2. Be descriptive, not evaluative
3. Give sufficient positive feedback
4. Beware of over-reliance on negative feedback.
5. Don't withhold negative critical information in order to avoid hassle.
6. Give ongoing feedback and be timely with respect to particular events or situations.
7. Give specific examples and guidelines rather than being vague and general.

Understand the Anatomy of Effective Requests and Promises

The purpose of communication in business is to make agreements on how we are going to take action to achieve the desired outcomes and create the results we want. The way we do this is through making requests and promises. Requests and promises are the commitment to some outcome occurring based on action. This is the lifeblood of business communication.

However, in order to make an effective request or promise, certain elements are necessary and must be present. There must be:

- A Speaker and Listener
- The conditions for satisfaction of the request
- A specified time-frame
- Assumed Competence – the speaker or requestor must have a basis for assuming the listener can deliver on the request
- Sincerity on both the part of the speaker and the listener

- A Shared Language – e.g. shared understanding of the operating assumptions, values, and principles that are driving the business or project at hand

The most common ways we sabotage our communications are by:

- Making unclear requests
- Not making requests
- Not communicating expectations
- Promising when unclear about the request
- Not declining requests (also known as Not Saying No!)
- Breaking promises without mending the break

Coined by Matthew Budd (author of *You Are What You Say*) as “linguistic viruses,” these actions or lack thereof, create confusion, resentment, communication and relationship breakdown, and unmet goals.

Know the Building Blocks of Dialogue that Lead to New Learning, Innovation & Synergy

With the complexity and continuous change leaders and managers face today, continuous learning, responsiveness, adaptation and innovation are essential survival skills. Yet, one constant that human beings seem to want and need more than anything when they are in relationship to another human is to be heard. So often in conversation, we spend a lot more time advocating for our position rather than seeking to hear and understand another.

Listening may be the single most powerful skill of communication for it is an act of respect and of valuing. It seems counterintuitive, yet when we listen and seek to understand first, we also create more receptivity in the other to hear us. When we create such an environment of safety, people are willing to take risks and new learning can occur. The competitive edge in business will be maintained by those who are continually learning how to improve.

There are four building blocks of conversation that help people move out of defensive, routinized, or reactive communication patterns that inhibit movement towards clear action and successful achievement of desired goals.

1. Developing Your Listening Skills

This includes eye contact, listening without thinking of one’s rebuttals or preparing for what to say next, listening for emotional content as well as information, and asking questions to clarify meaning

2. Seeking to Suspend Judgment

To be human is to be a judgment manufacturer. We are always in the process of making judgments, both positive and negative. Whether we are judging ourselves or others, judgment shuts down creativity, imagination and learning. Whether you agree or disagree with the other person, your judgments will limit your ability to listen and learn something new. Be aware that negative judgments are particularly damaging to your ability to listen.

Strive to first be aware of your judgments. In so doing, you can become clear that this is a reaction and you can then more objectively bring it into the conversation as an interpretation.

3. Testing Your Assumptions

Assumptions are all those things that we think we know about how reality is, whether for ourselves or for others. We carry multiple sets of assumptions that act as lenses or filters for our perceptions. Because each of us has a unique life experience, we each carry a unique set of assumptions although we do, of course, also have shared assumptions which serve to glue us together. Different assumptions in and of themselves don't create problems so much as the need to be right about our assumptions!

Effective communication demands that we test our own assumptions as well as clarify those of others. Only then can we know that we are speaking a shared language of meaning.

4. Balancing use of inquiry with advocating your own position and interests

Growing out of the ability to listen, inquiry is about asking questions and holding an attitude of curiosity. Questions that seek to understand (as opposed to questions that seek to interrogate) create doorways into new levels of understanding and learning for both the speaker and the listener. Inquiry, by its very nature, can deepen your ability to think systemically because questions often reveal the relationships among the parts that make up the whole.

Organizations and businesses need to create effective communication cultures in order to thrive. Leaders who understand and employ these high-impact communication strategies will create robust and resilient organizations that cannot only adapt to the new challenges and changing conditions of these uncertain times but can actually thrive. Developing and implementing effective feedback mechanisms, understanding the anatomy of effective requests and promises, and using the building blocks of dialogue will reap you and your business the multiple benefits of decreasing individual and organizational conflict, speeding up innovation and cycle time, and increasing productivity and profit.

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