

Communication and Listening

Communication is a vital skill in the business world. It is necessary to all of the functions that a business performs. It is the tool that allows information to flow between people. The more responsibility that you have at a business, the more communication your job will require. Communication can take place in meetings, casually during employee breaks, over the phone, e-mail, video conferencing, etc. Being able to express yourself adequately and interpret meaning from others is essential to success.

Sending Your Message

It is important to be clear in the message that you are sending to others.

Communicating is much more than just the words that you pass along. Other factors such as voice intonation, body language, message length, and timing of the message can add additional meaning. The words that you use are simply symbols for the message that you are trying to convey to another person. As an effective communicator, you want to make sure that the meaning you are trying to share with another is being accurately interpreted.

Suppose you decide that you need to have an employee work late in the evening. You ask the employee a day ahead of time if he or she would mind staying late and helping with the inventory. The employee agrees to do so, and the employee does not have any conflicts. After staying an hour after work the next day, the employee is ready to leave for a soccer game. You are upset because the employee is not working “late” as promised. The problem here is that you had a different meaning for what working late was. Maybe you felt that late means three or four hours while your employee thought that you were meaning an hour.

Misunderstandings can cause embarrassment and anger. People are misunderstood every day. There is no way to make sure that everyone will understand you because as individuals we all have different experiences. Every individual is shaped by their experiences in how they see the world. There are many factors outside of your

hands that communication can be disrupted by. When this happens it is important to clear it up as soon as possible.

Barriers to Communication

There are many barriers to communication that are very common. One example can be general distractions that are going on. It is complicated to do too many things at one time, or to listen when there are loud noises in the environment. It may be difficult to understand someone if they contradict themselves, or if their body language does not match what they are saying. Power and status positions can change how communication is understood. Coworkers and employees are much more willing to communicate and share if they feel that the listener is open to a conversation. There are gender differences between males and females. Males tend to use more eye contact and females tend to nod more. A woman talking to a man may see his staring and not nodding as not listening, while the man is concentrating and being polite. Other cultures may have different rules about what is polite and what demonstrates listening that are different from American beliefs.

Additionally, communication can break down if the speaker does not seem credible, if the sender and speaker have emotional misunderstandings, or if the sender or speaker is feeling ill. Would you want to listen to a cafeteria supervisor explain the ins and outs of new computer software? Your emotions and lack of sleep can also dramatically affect your communication. It is very hard to listen if you are angry and preoccupied. It is hard to stay alert and interested if you are not getting enough sleep. These are many things to consider during your day-to-day communication.

Listening is as Important as Talking

When people think about communication they usually focus on the ability to send the message. It is important to note that the ability to listen or to receive the message is just as important. Listening is a skill that needs to be developed; it does not just happen without effort. Listening accounts for half of the entire communication process.

When listening to another person or reading another person's message, it is important to evaluate where it is coming from. Is the subject matter important to this person, or is it a casual message? Does the sender have any background experience that would shape their beliefs and expectations? You should be able to draw some conclusions in the beginning, but do not let them overshadow the information that you are collecting.

When being a good listener, pay attention to all the cues that are given to you. These are the same cues that you focus on when you are sending a message to another person. Some examples are voice intonation, message length, emotion, and body language. A common mistake that most listeners make is that they start thinking about a reply before they fully take in the message that is sent to them. This is what occurs anytime an interruption occurs. You obviously can't listen and interpret meaning if you are busy worrying what your next word will be.

In addition to making sure that you receive the entire message, there are different steps you can take to make sure that the other person knows that you are listening or that you understand the words that they have sent to you. When you reply to what was said, the sender knows that you got the message. This feedback you reply allows the speaker to add to the meaning and make sure that you do indeed understand. If you are able to have

a visible meeting with the person, you can use body language such as nodding and other gestures to show that you are eagerly listening. If you are having trouble understanding fully, try paraphrasing what has been said back to the speaker to clarify any points.

Additionally, ask specific questions and tell the speaker to elaborate.

Various ways to Communicate

The medium that you use to communicate can have an impact on the ability to listen and to have feedback. In person conversations are the best for devising true meaning. Phone calls are also good because they allow for real time exchange provided that you are able to get a hold of the listener. Mail and e-mail are also usually effective ways to communicate. Sometimes a sender of the message does not quite know when their message will be received. Additionally, the message could never get to its destination. Regardless of the way you choose to communicate, make sure that you always do so in a tasteful, professional manner. Keep in mind that written messages also can be looked back on for review. Others may have access to your oral and written statements. A general rule of thumb is that if you do not feel comfortable saying something in person, then you should not hide behind other forms of communication. In the business world, make sure that people who should not have certain information do not get their hands on it. Many times confidential information needs to be communicated between individuals.

Some situations are more appropriately handled in person. For example, serious decisions such as firing an employee should be done in person. Sometimes people tend to hide behind written communication when they have to be the bearer of bad news. It is also customary to make general comments to acknowledge events and send a card in some

instances to your boss, coworkers, clients, and community members as a part business and social gesture. When there are marriages or funerals it is customary to make a brief statement to the party involved as well as send a card and/or an appropriate gift.

Communication Within Your Business

There are many things that you can do within your business to facilitate open communication. Typically an environment with a structure that allows communication between and within authority groups is the best way to share information. Open door policies are common and are exactly what they sound like. People with authority in your business provide an atmosphere that allows for everyone in the organization to feel like that they can talk to them.

More communication provides more understanding within an organization. Additional measures to allow communication are surveys. These can be given to employees as well as customers. You are more likely to get honest feedback when the surveys are anonymous. A company can set up a task force to discuss issues as well as do exit interviews when workers leave the organization. It is better for a business to keep communication flowing then to shut it off. Often times there is gossip within organizations that spreads information. This is commonly referred to as the grapevine. By allowing open communication, it eliminates some of the inaccuracy that can be spread by grapevine gossip. Many times, however, the grapevine is an accurate way for employees to get information informally.

In summation, remember to send messages so that they can be understood. Make sure that you remember that listening is just as important as sending a message. Realize that communication breaks down all of the time, and that is a struggle that can be

handled. As you interact with other people be aware of the things that can break down the messages and feedback around you. Finally, continue to develop your communication skills and use them to the best of your ability every day. The passage of information in and out of your business is what allows it to accomplish tasks.

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