

Communicating Your Message to Your Team

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Communication is the foundation of successful teamwork. In order to work together effectively, team members must be aware of the team's vision, mission, purpose, specific goals, and allocated roles and responsibilities. Ongoing review, evaluation, and feedback facilitate such teamwork.

Communication entails the sending and receiving of information, and includes subconscious signals to ensure the information has been received. Good communication is thus a dual process: it comprises both the ability to articulate messages and the capacity to understand responses to them. A message contains verbal and non-verbal elements. To become effective communicators, we must understand the role of both verbal and non-verbal cues.

What You Need to Know

I have often—and so far unsuccessfully—attempted to explain to my team what is required to reach our goals. How can I get through to them?

You're probably failing to get your message across. In order for an audience to understand your message, you must address it in a way that will make it relevant and compelling to them. In articulating your message, make sure to appeal to your audience's expectations and motivations. Be prepared to take a different tack if this doesn't work.

My organization requires that I do something with which I do not personally agree. How can I give my team an instruction with which I disagree?

If you genuinely don't believe in what you are trying to communicate, your message will not be credible. Non-verbal cues will reveal that you do not agree with what you are saying. One way to avoid this is to identify a part of the message that you do believe in, and go from there. If you are incapable of this, you may, only as a last resort, invoke a "loyalty call"—that is, to be candid and ask your team to support the organization despite your personal objections.

Although I'm team leader, it seems like my team is leading me; they ignore me even when I try to assert my authority. How can I change this dynamic?

Perhaps you are being too passive. If you used to be a part of the team you are now leading, it can be difficult to establish distance between yourself and the team members. You can establish a new dynamic by giving and receiving feedback and by explaining in an assertive manner how your team is supposed to respond to such feedback. Also, establish a sense of professional distance to indicate that your position has changed.

How can I evaluate my communication skills?

Good communicators know that they are being understood when the audience shows signs of attention. These signs include eye contact, probing questions, and an open exchange of views. You can also judge whether you have managed to communicate your message if your audience is able to accurately repeat it.

What to Do

Wait for the Right Time

If you want your message to be heard, judge the best time to deliver it. For example, it is best to not discuss a project or request more resources from someone who is heading to a meeting or trying to catch a train. Equally, try to avoid imposing challenging tasks on someone who is already under a lot of pressure (either at work or at home). Before making contact, find out something of the context. And remember that, as most people don't handle the unexpected very well, it is your duty to avoid any nasty surprises; manage audience's expectations.

Know Your Own Style of Communication

There are different communication styles, and they vary in their effectiveness. Understanding our own communication strengths will help us to avoid areas of weakness and make our messages more compelling. There are four categories of communication styles: Aggressive, Passive, Passive/Aggressive, and—the ideal form of communication—Assertive.

If you can't readily identify your personal style, think about your most common communication experiences:

- Do you tend to dominate and only achieve things in the short-term?
- Are you constantly taking care of demands imposed by others?
- Do you tend to make your own case while avoiding confrontation?
- When you are discussing different ideas, do these interactions teach you something about the other person, and make you feel like you have reached an agreement that is acceptable for all parties?

Try to get feedback from a friend or colleague on some of these issues. Also, reflect on situations where you feel that you have communicated well, and where you have failed to do so. Try to figure out why that is.

Communicate Assertively

Assertive communication is the best for both parties. It neither fudges the issue, nor does it avoid potentially sensitive areas. Instead, this form of communication leads to both parties taking responsibility for their thoughts and feelings and communicating them clearly and honestly, without the risk of dismissal or prejudice. Assertive communication is characterized by mutual respect as well as attentive listening and exploratory questioning. This form of communication is also characterized by a lack of yelling or other forms of criticism—no dominating behavior, no cynical or dismissive comments, and no passive-aggressive behavior. A sense of humor always helps, as it can allow people to say things they may otherwise find difficult to articulate.

Think in a Structured Way

Good communicators have structured thoughts. They know what they want to say, and they articulate it well. Their messages are straightforward, clear, and consistent. These messages are expressed by the acronym KISS *Keep It Short and Simple*.

If your message is complex, it is best to practice it in advance, maybe in front of a mirror. When you hear yourself speak, you can get a better idea of the message's impact. You will also be able to establish the best way of explaining yourself and your motivations.

Build Rapport

Building rapport requires the display of empathy, or the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to experience what they may be experiencing and feel what they may be feeling. Once you take the other party's perspective into consideration, you are in a better position to communicate in a thoughtful manner. Building rapport also entails attentive listening and the asking of open-ended

questions. Attentive listening requires that we truly focus on what is being said. Often we hear a key word and instinctively provide the end of the sentence. On these occasions, we stop listening and interrupt with a “pat” answer which makes the speaker’s message superfluous—and alienates them. By listening attentively, on the other hand, we receive information and achieve a greater understanding of the other person’s perspective.

Use Congruent Body Language

We are aware that our bodies communicate a large part of our messages. Congruent body language means that our facial expressions and gestures correspond to our message. An example of *incongruent* body language is when someone says “yes” but shakes their head from side to side.

Effective body language is present when two people are engrossed in a conversation in which they are equally interested. If you observe two people talking over a drink, you’ll often notice that they drink at the same speed and that their bodies are mirror images of each other (for example, they might both be sitting with their arms held in the same way). When building rapport, try to (discretely) mirror the body position of the person with whom you are communicating. This will help you make an empathic connection because your body will be exposed to similar physical and emotional stimuli as the other person. You can use this to make the conversation more intimate and build greater rapport—and, therefore, communicate better.

Have fun with your communication—treat it as an art rather than a functional way to send and receive messages.

What to Avoid

You Confuse Assertiveness with Dominance

Giving orders generally alienates a team. The best way to establish a connection with team members is by asking them for their opinions. If things aren’t working out, ask them what is preventing their cooperation. It is possible that you have misread their motivations or underestimated the resources needed. It is your goal to open the communication channels and stimulate an atmosphere where feedback is freely offered.

You Assume That People Are Like You

We tend to believe that if we think something, then someone else thinks it too. This can lead to misunderstandings, which are a threat to good communication. Be aware of your assumptions and

check that the other person shares yours. If your assumptions do not match, have a look at where your opinions differ. This may well lead to finding common ground on which to communicate.

You Think That Communicating Well Means Communicating At Length

Good communicators do not go on for ages! On the contrary, they tend to be succinct. This means that messages don't get lost, but are conveyed effectively. Resist any tendency to overstate—remember, “less is more!”

You Forget the Importance of Body Language

Verbal communication comprises only 10% of a message. The remaining 90% is transmitted through non-verbal cues. Of this non-verbal communication, most is transmitted through the eyes. This fact becomes particularly compelling when you consider that most of our communication is effected by means of cell phones and e-mail.

Face-to-face communication, which includes the opportunity for eye contact, is the most powerful kind of communication. Most people have known speakers who look to the right or left of our head and fail to engage in any eye contact, or those who close their eyes while addressing us. Both of these visual techniques illustrate the importance of eye contact.

Where to Learn More

Books:

O'Connor, Joseph, and John Seymour. *Introducing NLP: Neuro-Linguistic Programming*. HarperCollins, 2003.

O'Connor, Joseph, and Andrea Lages. *How Coaching Works*. A & C Black, 2007.

Pease, Allan and Barbara Pease. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. Orion, 2005.

Web Sites:

Life Skills: http://lifskills.endlex.com/article/communicating_well.html

“On communicating well: use these five strategies to enhance your managerial communication skills”
by Joelle Jay: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3495/is_1_50/ai_n8700759

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