



LIBRARY LEADERSHIP

The challenge of exceptional communication

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to promote good communication practices.

Design/methodology/approach – The article defines the elements of the communication process, shows the most likely trouble spots in that process and discusses what good communication practice looks like practically.

Findings – The article's findings are that the key to good communication practices is strong trusting relationships between the communicators.

Practical implications – Good communication practices affect productivity and therefore the bottom line.

Social implications – Workplace relationships affect the quality of workplace communication and vice versa.

Originality/value – The value of the article is a reminder of how to deal effectively with one of the most common workplace challenges.

Keywords Workplace relationships, Communication practices, Communication process

Paper type Conceptual paper

The top ongoing challenge in most organizations is maintaining good communication. We usually express this in terms like “strong lines” or “open channels” of communication. But positive, productive communication involves more than just the channel that people use to communicate. Other components of the process of communication include the communicator, who frames the communication in a certain way, and the receiver, who not only receives it but also interprets it using specific filters. Understanding the entire process is important to doing it well. Good communication practices have everything to do with productivity and therefore the bottom line of an organization.

If there is miscommunication occurring or if communication efforts seem to be unproductive in an organization, we often look for a faulty channel because it is the easiest part to see and therefore the easiest to fix when it is broken. To be sure, the appropriate channel should be selected for any communication and that channel must be in proper working order to optimize the desired effect of the communication, but it is rarely the problem. The channel has the least to do with the “human factor” in the communication process, and as any manager can attest, the human factor can be extremely messy, variable and severely unpredictable. That is what makes it both hard to troubleshoot and hard to fix when it disrupts the communication process. Because the



sender and the receiver are both human beings and subject to the human factor, they are usually the source of breakdowns in communication.

As the initiator of the communication process, the sender bears primary responsibility for the success of the communication. Not only does the sender need to make sure of the accuracy of the content of the communication but also needs to frame the communication in a way that will be the most likely to achieve the desired effects. This includes the timing, the language used, the channel and format of the message. The “messy” part of this is that the sender must not only deal with his/her own perceptions in framing the message but must attempt to anticipate those of the intended audience. Success therefore depends largely on the sender’s knowledge of the intended receivers and ability to make the choices that will make the message the least susceptible to being altered or blocked by the filters of the intended audience. Because the members of the intended audience are always unique individuals, knowing them at the level necessary for success is difficult at best and there is often not a single way to frame a message that will allow it to pass through all of their filters simultaneously. This is why mass communication usually involves a deliberate choice to use a multiplicity of times, channels, formats and sometimes even languages (or language styles) to reach as many people as possible with the intended message. This is also why social media is now being touted as the way to tailor messages to targeted individuals because they can more easily be grouped according to common interests, goals or backgrounds.

We have all heard of communication failures where we could easily identify a lack of care on the part of the communicator in choosing the best way to frame their message. But even with the most carefully thought-out message, failure can still occur, leaving the sender bewildered as to what went wrong. Here is where the receiver bears some responsibility in the process. The receiver must assume that the sender is sending a message in good faith with a desire to be understood correctly. The receiver can help the process by using active listening techniques, such as giving full attention to the communicator, and if possible verifying his or her understanding of the message with the communicator. This, of course, takes effort and must be supported by a desire on the part of the receiver to fully understand the message.

Because communication can only fail if there is an unwillingness or total inability on the part of either the sender or receiver to put forth the effort necessary to see it succeed, the successful manager must cultivate a workplace culture that rewards good communication practices. This is done by first setting a good example in putting forth great effort to both frame communication responsibly and in being diligent in listening actively to communication to make sure he or she understands the intended meaning clearly. Training may be necessary and should always be encouraged in this area.

Most workers will easily discover the value of good communication practices, as they are able to accomplish work in collaboration with each other with fewer frustrating misunderstandings that sap time and productivity. But the wise manager knows that incentives help to get to that place and maintain it. One of the most effective incentives is simple recognition of good communication practices when they are applied by staff members. If done in staff meetings or by email sent to all staff, this recognition will encourage both the one who put forth the extra effort and others to emulate that behavior. So how does good communication look in practical application?

The communicator must weigh his or her words carefully each time he speaks or writes. Do not be afraid to defer answering until you have had time to fully investigate

a matter, but by the same token, do not take too long to respond when timeliness is important. Always read written communication out loud before sending it, to catch errors in grammar and to get an idea for the tone that the receiver will “hear” in it. Be especially careful about using sarcasm and other modes of less-than-straightforward expression unless you know the receiver(s) well enough to know how they will take it. Always be as open and up front with everyone as much as possible while guarding the confidentiality with which you have been entrusted. Regard each individual with which you communicate as important and let it show. Whenever you need to make any decision that affects others, communicate with them about your thoughts on the decision you have to make and get their feedback before finalizing the decision and beware of assuming that they know anything that you have not told them. Always encourage questions until your message is clear to your listeners. Common courtesy and civility are never wasted in any effort to communicate.

The receiver must make sure he or she understands the intent of the communicator in every communication. Even if there is little doubt as to the intent it is still a good idea to confirm it by rephrasing the message back to the communicator. Always assume the best of intentions in the communication until it is obviously otherwise. Remember that when you reply to a message you become the communicator and must then bear primary responsibility for the success of the communication, but as an active listener, you can greatly influence the direction of a conversation.

What should be obvious from all of this is that good, successful communication helps to build good relationships while at the same time being greatly enhanced by them. The most important key to communicating effectively is having a strong trusting relationship with your receivers that will aid in knowing intentions and overlooking minor lapses in good communication practice, which are bound to happen. The receiver’s perception of your character will set the stage for any communication that you offer. That is why cultivating good relationships through each communication will help ensure the success of future communication efforts.

About the author

Gary Fitsimmons is currently Director of Library Services at Bryan College with 15 years of director experience and over 22 years in librarianship. Gary Fitsimmons can be contacted at: gfitsimmon5590@bryan.edu

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