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Verbal Communications Difficulties

How to talk to people

Nothing seems as frustrating as finding that which you have stated in plain English has been misunderstood or mis-communicated. Equally frustrating is having an inability to say what is on your mind to another person. Let's examine these verbal issues.

1. Clarity of your Statements

As you gaze upon the countenance of another person, you will clearly note that the other person looks very different from you. That fact is obvious. What is equally true, but not as obvious, is that the brain of the other person is just as different from yours as that visage appears to be. And, what that means is that the words that you use or the phrase or message that you convey to the other can have just as different an interpretation by that person as the two faces are different.

Recently, I used the word 'acceptable' to a person. My interpretation of the word was to mean that the issue had achieved my goals and hence was acceptable. My friend explained that his meaning of acceptable was conditional, namely that the acceptable issue has passed but it lacked some needed refinement. Two interpretations of the simple word 'acceptable'!

2. Solutions to Clarity

First, you must allow for the possibility of a misinterpretation occurring easily. One way to help reduce that possibility is to state the point a second time using completely different words.

A second, and quite effective way to assure clarity, is to have the other person repeat back to you their understanding of what you just said. This is easier to do with people ranked below you, but more difficult, culturally speaking, to do with people equal to or above us in the hierarchy of our mind.

Or, after a verbal conversation, send an email to the person stating: "This is my understanding of our conversation earlier today. If I do not hear from you within 48 hours, I will assume my interpretation is similar to your's."

3. Saying the Un-sayable

If you are in the delicate situation of having to convey an unpleasant message to another person such as "you are a dirty mess" or "you reek of body odour" or "you talk too much", you would not be alone if you decided to not speak directly about it. Many people confronted by these or similar situations hope that the indirect means that they often use, would be understood by the offender. For example, instead of saying 'you talk too much', they might either make a light joke of the loquaciousness or continue working at their desk while the gabby person continues the monologue. Neither of these approaches will work. There is only one way to deal with it – the direct way. But you do need to be clever about it.

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4. Solutions to Difficult Messages

Often, the bull-in-a-China-shop approach will work ("You stink, Harry!) but most of us are not socially prepared to be so direct. What I recommend is that:

- You accept the necessity of this communication falling into your lap.
- Prepare yourself for a verbal exchange by writing down what you might say. In our example, let us imagine you have a production worker, who otherwise is very good in her work, but talks too much to other workers.
- Attempt to deal with facts, not emotions.
- Clarify that your emotions regarding this issue are your own feelings.
- Get feedback from the employee after you have exchanged the communications.
- Do not argue with their protests, if they come, but let the person's defending statements pass unchallenged – although you should reinforce your point.

Your note to yourself might read as follows:

Mary, I don't wish to belittle the good work you do here, but I find that you talk too much. It simply bothers me because I don't think it is a good work habit and I think you are wasting your time. I think you waste other workers' time too.

Your resulting conversation might come out as follows:

Mary, we need to chat about something that has been on my mind for a while. Actually, I am not sure how to say this to you, but it is important enough to me to bring it up now. As your supervisor, I find it difficult to praise your otherwise good work when I find, what seems to me, you talking so often with other workers. I ask you not to visit other stations to chat unless it is strictly a business issue. Does this make sense to you?

She replies

I always only talk about business when I visit other people.

You respond

I am glad to hear that. Just try to minimize the visits if you can.

Even though you may not believe her response, nothing is served by getting into a debate. You have communicated a difficult message. End of story. And, believe me, she will absorb your message. She will understand that her repeated conversations affects your assessment of her work, and ultimately of her promotions and pay raises.

Good luck

Bill