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Four Ways to Improve Communication at Work

It is possible to build better workplace relationships by communicating clearly and confidently.



By Vivian Ciampi

Throughout my more than two-decade tenure as an executive coach and vice president in corporate America, I have seen millions of dollars senselessly lost due to ineffective communication. It's imperative for achievement-oriented professionals to communicate well in all aspects of their job. Doing so can be the key to cutting through the bureaucracy of an organization and taking control of one's career, as opposed to feeling like a victim of circumstance. Mastering even a handful of skills can help professionals better negotiate their way through the proverbial career maze with speed, dexterity and accuracy.

Navigating the Gray Area

Because modern workplace dynamics have become so complex, leaders have less time to spend coaching and mentoring employees, and to benefit from such guidance for their own professional gain. In addition, universities systematically churn out graduates who have learned black-and-white technical skills and theoretical concepts, but not

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how to aptly prepare for, and traverse through, the inevitable gray area of a company—the environment and culture that manifests from the multi-faceted challenges and forces an organization faces.

The result is a glut of entry-level and entrenched professionals who are unprepared, unequipped and unable to effectively communicate in a way that will productively impact their careers. While intangible, the gray area is a very real phenomenon driven by human nature, internal and external politics, industry guidelines, company protocols, and market pressures, among other factors.

Successful Communication

The importance of learning how to effectively communicate within this ambiguous environment cannot be understated. Too many in our nation's workforce—both employees and executives—are ill-equipped to engage with an audience with ease and intention, which keeps them from realizing their full potential and attaining a maximum measure of success. With this in mind, the following four tactical tips can help professionals at every level become more effective communicators and, in doing so, gain better control of their career trajectory.

Become the “Universal Translator”

The most valued and successful person in any business is the one who can translate facts, figures, and concepts into actionable ideas that will not only make sense and resonate with their direct network, but also with any and all constituents those ideas will be presented to. This includes superiors, subordinates, peers, customers, prospects, business partners and vendors.

The Universal Translator steps out of their comfort zone or discipline, lets go of insider department lingo and technical terms, and focuses on the audience at hand. The Universal Translator then suggests specific ways others can move forward with the information relative to what is important to them, and presents the vision, plan or theory in a way

that is clear, crisp, confident, and above all, actionable. This person is successful because of their ability to translate complex or technical concepts into strategic steps that will impact the bottom line. If others can understand, relate to and rally around what you are presenting, it is sure to yield winning results.

Meet Before You Meet

Fewer things are more painful and embarrassing than getting completely derailed in a meeting. Many people have seen it: someone shows up with well-prepared, rehearsed slides, only to get completely pummeled with questions from every discipline in the room before they even get beyond the intro-

duction page. Instead of moving forward with their agenda, they are sent 10 paces back and five paces to the side, only to leave the meeting with more work, lost credibility, a confused and frustrated audience and, above all, no progress on the agenda at hand. If you've experienced this personally or seen it happen to another, you know it is hard to recover.

resentation, but also help you stay poised and prepared to present in the real meeting. Socializing the idea ahead of time may feel like extra work, but the benefits far outweigh the additional time—and the real risks of not doing so. This strategy will facilitate your ability to cover a lot of ground and garner decisions in the meeting without playing catch-up or spending time trying to get everyone on the same page. Effective communication, speed and alignment are a few of the key advantages here.

Stop, Ask and Listen

Today's fast-paced workplace has most of us running at record speed, often in circles like we're on a hamster wheel. We

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are putting out fires and have more in our email inbox than our outbox every day. The resulting pressure of this overload causes us to rush through conversations so we can cross them off our to-do lists and move on to the next triaged task. Unfortunately, plowing through important conversations will never yield a productive outcome, but often produces more work and headaches.

Several steps can be taken to approach key conversations that need a little extra finesse or persuasion, particularly in the midst of a time-pressed schedule. Stop and take a breath so you don't rush into your agenda in the first five minutes of the conversation. Ask open-ended questions, such as “What's going on in your department?” or “How has this system helped you?” Once the person you're engaged with has the opportunity to respond, make 200% sure you are actively listening—not just

hearing them—and that you give them ample time to convey their thoughts without your interjection, direction, or interruption. The majority of the time, you will gain key insights from these conversations and will be able to craft a

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more informed response—one that better resonates with the person(s) you're speaking with. Even if you already know the answer or have a brilliant retort, slowing down and letting others speak first, and in full, allows them to “empty their cup,” which puts them in a better position to have it filled back up with what you have to say in response.

When you do finally have the chance to speak, remember people only have the capacity to absorb so much. If we provide an overload of verbose detail, you risk overflowing the listener's “cup” and may ultimately lose the essence of what you are trying to convey. Stay focused on who your audience is and what they care about to ensure that your dialogue and key points are streamlined and succinct.

This tactic also helps build more productive, trusting professional relationships. The most successful people in any company aren't necessarily the smartest, but rather those who take the time to listen and learn from others because they truly value what they have to say. Adhering to this strategy will not only make you a much more effective communicator, but it will also garner tremendous goodwill throughout the organization as you start to hone a discipline of talking less and listening more.



Converse with Clarity

People today are inundated with data, work under tight timeframes, and talk in acronyms. Certain technical people and other professionals tend to use insider jargon and industry terminology when they communicate, making it difficult for anyone outside their immediate network to understand. In addition, incompetent people tend to rush through important details, hoping no one else will ask questions or notice their ineptitude. Such conversation crushers can leave others feeling intimidated, out of the loop and unable to effectively contribute.

Rather than contributing poorly to the conversation or sitting on the sidelines as the dialogue ensues, a better approach is to pick the right setting and ask clarifying questions to ensure messaging remains on point and resultant activities on track. If you're not sure where to start, the basic who, what, where, when, why and how is a sensible approach. For example, ask: “Why are we doing this?” “How will that work?” “Where will this help the organization?” The win-win with this strategy is that it fosters clear dialogue,

makes people accountable to answer direct questions, and often uncovers problems that need to be addressed but would have been overlooked had this approach not been used.

Reaping the Rewards

Globalization, technology, rampant regulation and fierce competition at every turn have made today's workplace more complicated than ever. This is causing professionals at all levels—from the mail room to the board room—to flounder as they attempt to navigate the escalating complexities, consistently perform at a high level, and achieve upward career mobility. Heed these four tips and you'll be well on your way to communicating more effectively and reaping the professional rewards in kind. ☐

About the Author

Vivian Ciampi, an executive coach and Harvard Business School executive education department coach and facilitator, is a principal at Professional Coaching, LLC, a business navigational coaching firm that helps universities, small- to mid-size businesses, and large organizations accelerate the growth and success of their top talent. She specializes in helping professionals become better communicators in order to achieve greater success in their careers and balance in their lives. For more information, visit www.coachingtheprofessional.com.

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