

Creating Crystal Clear Communication: The Basics

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Everyone talks about the need to improve communication. I have yet to work with a HR department that has not cited communication deficits as one of their on-going struggles. Whether it is complaints about misuse of e-mail, language difficulties or simply the inability to clearly communicate with the business units, my clients continually put communication problems on the short-list of organizational ills. Let me share some of what I've learned.

There are basic communication competencies that help build better relationships with colleagues, whether they are in the HR department or in the business units you support. Let's review three of those basics.

1 • Shut-up! You can't talk and listen at the same time, so, put a zipper on it (your mouth that is). The more time we spend listening the easier it is to resolve conflicts. Listening requires that we tune in to the message. It also requires that we become aware of the internal distractions; that noisy chatter in our heads gets in the way of receiving the message.

2 • Enough really is ENOUGH! Make your point clearly and concisely. Words are not like money, more is not always better. You can achieve brevity by thinking your message through before

you deliver it. Consider the main points. What is the "must share" information? Brevity also shows respect for the listener's time. It creates time for them to be active in the communication exchange. Remember, good communication is not a one-way process.

but she looks like she's said this a million times and would rather be elsewhere. Ask yourself: Are you that trainer? Is this how you deliver an orientation? Do you typically look distracted or disinterested? Does your annoyance glare like a neon sign? Pay attention to your posture too.

Those crossed arms can easily be interpreted as defensive. More is communicated through your nonverbal cues than through the spoken word, so be keenly aware of that body talk.

Customer Communication

Now that we've reviewed the basics, let's talk about customer communication. Yes, those people in the business units are really your customers. And so are all of those applicants who send you countless e-mails and even come to your office. How do you consistently send messages that will be well-received? Beginning with print messages. Letters, advertisements, proposals and all other forms of written communication need to be error free. Nothing is more unprofessional than letters

with grammar and spelling errors. I cringed when a friend showed me an offer letter with two grammatical errors and two spelling errors. That reflected poorly on the recruiter and the company.

There are three basic competencies that help build better relationships with colleagues.

1 • You can't talk and listen at the same time.

2 • Make your point clearly and concisely.

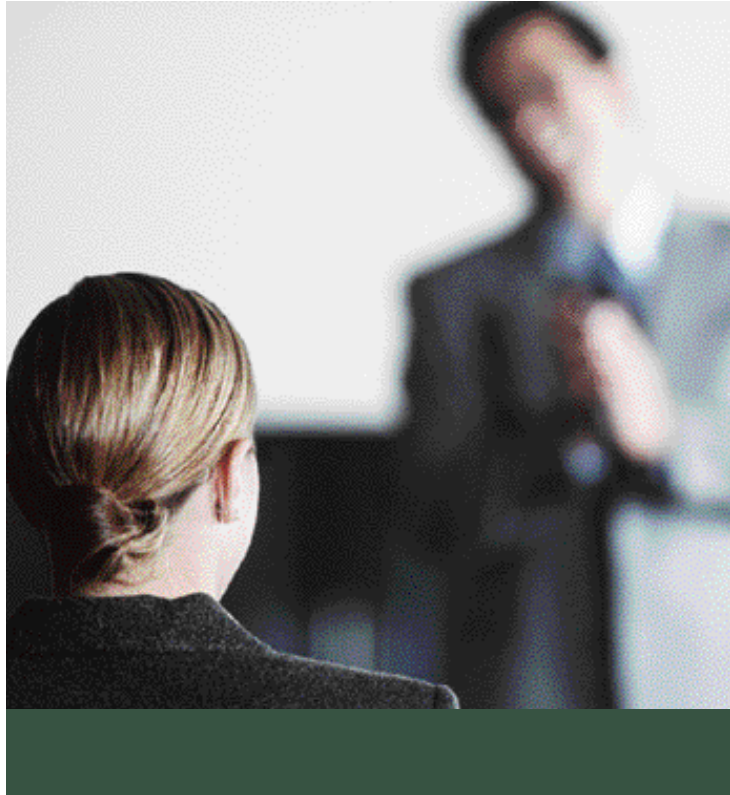
3 • The nonverbal cues that we send speak volumes.

3 • Your face is telling the real story! The nonverbal cues that we send speak volumes. Ever been to a training session with a near comatose facilitator? She may be reciting the script verbatim,

Spend time and energy having everything that goes out edited, proofed and corrected before it leaves your office.

Consider the customer's time when composing written material. Get to the point! They'll appreciate a targeted, concise message. Last, don't overdo it with written communication. The same applies to e-mail, which we'll discuss in just a moment. The personal touch of a phone call conveys more warmth. It gives you another opportunity to directly connect with the customer. So, if it's an issue that could easily be covered with a quick chat, by all means, call!

Just as important, communication between colleagues. It is essential that you treat your HR colleagues with the same concern as your customers in the business units. When communicating with them, whether on the phone, via e-mail or in person, listen and reply in a way that will build bridges, not walls. When you have an opportunity to bridge the electronic divide, do so. It is so silly for people sitting three yards apart to use e-mail to discuss matters that could easily, and quickly, be resolved face to face. Another point to remember when communicating with colleagues is that they too, have a perspective. And, that perspective may be very different from yours. So, just as you work to educate, inform and sell customers, you will need to do the same with some people within your own department. Don't assume that they know what you're working on or that



they know your pressures and deadlines. Create opportunities to educate colleagues.

Electronic Communication

Thus far we've discussed communication basics that will make you a better speaker, and, equally as important, a better listener. Now let's put all of that into a twenty-first century high tech context—communicating via e-mail. This is a hot topic! There are eight practical pointers that facilitate better electronic communication.

1 • Let's be brief. Just as in the case with other forms of communication, it's best to get to the point. People get so many e-mails and so little time to review them all, so think about the message that you want to convey and then craft it with respect for the reader's time. Now this is not to say that you should ignore basic pleasantries like a greeting and appropriate closure.

2 • Clarity counts.

Make sure your message makes sense. Be as clear as you possibly can. Don't use ambiguous words and phrases because they quickly mislead the reader. Also, make sure that your expectations are clear—if you want the reader to act, react, reply, or respond, say so! Lots of time gets wasted trying to interpret unclear, vague e-mail messages.

3 • Privacy please.

If you must forward a message or send the message to multiple recipients, blind copy each person. This shows respect for the privacy of each of the recipients. This also makes for a shorter message when it's printed or appears on the screen.

4 • Massage the message.

When we're angry, hurried or harried, it's critical that we take the time to massage the message so not to offend, alienate or just annoy the receiver. Sarcasm doesn't convey well electronically, not that it goes over especially well in person. Be sure to take the time to soften and finesse your message. Consider waiting two hours before sending an angry message; you may reconsider and try another approach to conflict resolution.

5 • Attachments can attack.

If you can include your attachment in the body of the message, please do. Many a virus, Trojan and other problem are hidden in those seemingly innocuous attachments. And, if you just have to send an

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attachment, send the smallest size you possibly can. This is another trick that shows respect for the reader's time.

6 • Grammar and spelling count. Just like grammar and spelling matter in every other written communication, they matter in e-mail too! Take the time to edit your work for good sentence structure and basic grammar. Since spell check is right at your fingertips, use it!

7 • Discretion please. Your colleagues really don't want to receive all of your jokes, religious diatribe and inspiration, they're just too polite to say "Cut it out!" And guess what? They don't want to see pictures of your pets and children either. Consider your relationship with colleagues, the tone and nature of the humor before sending anything. Then, ask yourself "Is this really worth sending?"

8 • Nothing replaces the human touch, absolutely nothing! If you can just pick up the phone and make a call, please do! If you can get a nice card to send, please do! You will build stronger bridges by using the human touch.

These tips, when consistently applied, will help you master electronic communication.

*Joanne L. Smikle will present a Pre-Conference Workshop—PEOPLE, PROCESS PRODUCT - ALIGNING HR—Wednesday, September 17, 8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. at this year's 46th Annual PIHRA Conference & Exhibition. Smikle is the author of the recently released book *Calamity-Free Collaboration: Making Teamwork WORK!* Visit this dynamic speaker, consultant and trainer at www.smiklespeaks.com.*