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Effective communication: A critical component of job success

Hannah Morgan, a nationally recognized author, speaker and career innovator, points out, “Successfully interacting with others is a key to your professional success. Whether you are a leader, aspiring leader or in a support role, developing your communication skills can impact your success.”

I am a firm believer effective communication is the backbone of every successfully functioning organization, work unit, team and individual team member. With the importance of communication, what guidelines and food for thought can we consider that will enable us to enhance our skills?

Have you ever said, “I told her exactly how I wanted it and when. Why does this always happen to me? There is no way he could have misunderstood?” As senders, we assume we say what we mean. But when we leave it solely up to the receiver of our messages to interpret what we mean, we almost always suffer the consequences.

Many words we use in everyday conversation have multiple meanings. In fact, the 500 most commonly used words in our language have more than 14,000 dictionary definitions, so assuming the other person is on the same wavelength with you can be hazardous to your communication health.

What can we do? We can avoid making assumptions, provide opportunities for feedback, ask for clarification, be aware of nonverbal communication and tone of voice,

and — most importantly — be an active listener.

Peter Drucker, a management guru, once said, “The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.” An often overlooked aspect of the whole communication process is nonverbal. In our organizations, the communication of ideas and instructions is of primary importance. Unless we observe, read and understand nonverbal clues, according to Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of “Silent Messages,” we lose as much as 50 percent of the message being communicated.

We should be able to read the nonverbal cues others send us, as well as be acutely aware of the nonverbal cues we transmit. Keep in mind when our verbal message (the words we speak) is contradicted by our nonverbal message (body language, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.), we send a mixed message. Based on Dr. Mehrabian’s research on this situation, 90 percent of the time the receiver of our mixed message will believe the nonverbal aspect. In other words, actions speak louder than words. I encourage you to work to increase your power in the nonverbal aspect of communication; it can increase trust and credibility.

“Most of the successful people I’ve known are the ones who do more listening than talking,” said Bernard Baruch, American financier and advisor to presidents. A key to effective communication is certainly listening. Are you a good listener? Or is this an area in which you need to improve?

We all need to be good senders and good receivers. Isn’t it interesting how some of us are so eager to talk but reluctant to listen?

A few steps to effective listening include:

- Show interest. Pay attention, maintain good eye contact, ask questions and empathize.
- Avoid interrupting. Let others complete their thoughts; it is the courteous thing to do. If you need to immediately clarify a point, say, “Excuse me just a moment,” make the point and then let the speaker continue.
- Be patient. Refrain from fidgeting, drumming on your desk, clicking your pen or finishing other’s sentences. These activities all take away from the positive, active listening process.

Learning how to communicate effectively is one of the most rewarding skills we can develop and can certainly help lead to job success. Though it is a process that requires work, it is well worth the effort. Dr. Stephen Covey put it very well when he wrote, “We need to speak to be understood and listen to understand.”

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