Managing in the new millennium: six tips to more effective communication

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Communication is absolutely essential to business. National and global surveys have continued to cite the importance of soft skills in the workplace—with communication skills ranking among the most important. And yet, employers report both the oral and written communication skills of prospective job candidates and employees are at such poor levels as to be identified as “deficient”. Many organizations have suggested that they are better prepared to teach the technical skills to their employees (rather than the “soft skills”). In today's job market, these communication skills have become the new “hard skills”.

To stay marketable, employees at all levels must constantly focus on their communication skills. These skills are crucial to everyone's career development. Communication is key in building relationships with others. And as managers, they have increased importance. Since management is defined as getting things done through other people, the ability to communicate becomes essential.

Ironically enough, most people think that communicating is easy. While it might indeed be perceived as relatively easy by some, effective communication in reality is quite difficult to achieve. Effective communication requires hard work and attention to several key points.

1. Recognize that miscommunication is the norm.

Nearly seventy-five percent of the communications received are incorrectly received. Miscommunication is the norm. This occurs as people think they don't have to put much effort into the process and that it just comes naturally. People even tend to think that they are good communicators. But the reality is indeed very different. Miscommunication is the result of two critical assumptions that are made by most people. First, people tend to assume that they know what others mean. And second, people assume that others know what they mean. Both of these assumptions can hinder the ability to effectively communicate. If we assume that others understand the message we are sending, we don't provide an opportunity for them to ask questions and we don't clarify the intended message. In extreme cases, we only provide part of the information (since we assume they know the rest anyway). When we assume that we know what others mean, once again, we don't ask for any feedback or clarification. In many cases, we even stop listening to the communication when we think we know what the message is. And unfortunately, we often hear what we want to hear—regardless of the actual message sent.

To be more effective, it is best to use feedback—both on the sending and receiving ends of the communication process. This provides an opportunity for us to ensure that others really did receive the message that we intended them to receive.

Providing feedback to others gives us the opportunity to repeat back the message to the sender to ensure that we did receive the intended message.

2. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Miscommunication is often the result when people say one thing and yet mean another. It is critical that we clearly articulate what we really mean. It is hard enough in the communication process to ensure that the message sent is the one received. If the message sent is further complicated by a lack of clarity and a failure to state the real message, there is almost no chance of the intended meaning being received.

Since people dislike communicating bad news, they often beat around the bush and the intended message is not received. It is best (even with bad news) that tact and respect are used to clearly communicate the message. Humor might even be used appropriately. The caution, however, is not to let the humor mask the true message being sent.

3. In business writing, brief is better.

Organizational communication has been referred to as the nervous system of the organization. The exchange of information is critical to successful organizational performance. Improved communication can result in improved performance levels within the organization.

When writing business letters and reports, an effort should be made to be brief and direct. When reports are lengthy, subheadings and a table of contents should be used to help the reader navigate the report to find specific information. Anything that is extraneous to the text should be placed in an appendix in the back of the report. In addition, an executive summary is highly recommended. This provides the
reader with the "Reader's Digest" version of the report.

Business report writing is not the time to write the great American novel. While sufficient information should be included, it should be presented in clear form with understandable language. Any acronyms used should be commonly understood (or defined in the report). Care should also be taken to ensure that any business documents are free of spelling and grammar errors.

4. When using email, think before sending.

Email has become the communication channel of choice for all too many messages. It is appropriate for some messages, but is not meant to replace face-to-face communication for personal and emotional messages. One large organization found this out the hard way when there was public outrage for sending emails to 800 employees to notify them that they were being laid off. Terminations, layoffs, demotions, and disciplinary action should be conducted in person.

With the ease of using email, important netiquette for using this technology has been forgotten. It is important to view the email as any other written communication. This means that every email should contain both a salutation and a proper closing. Proper sentence structure should also be used (with each sentence including a subject and a verb). Capitalization should be used (though not exclusively). Spell check should also be utilized.

It is easy to use email to vent. The danger is that in the heat of anger or an emotional tirade, an email will be drafted and then the send button hit before thinking. A word to the wise advises that the email message should be reviewed and carefully considered prior to sending it. If the message is particularly sensitive, it might be best to save the message and then return to review it at a later time -when you are less emotionally charged.

Email is not as rich a communication channel as face-to-face communication because the communicators cannot see one another. All of the nonverbal signals are missing from these emails. Special care must be taken in the choice of words and phrases to ensure that effective communication results.

5. Remember that talking is only half of the communication process.

Many people think that they are not communicating if they are not speaking. The communication process, however, has two halves--speaking and listening. Cicero once said that it is a good thing that humans were given one mouth and two ears--in light of the way that we use them. It must come as no surprise that people tend to be better at speaking than at listening. Yet if sufficient attention is not paid to listening, the intended message will surely not be received. Too often people perceive listening to be a passive process. To be more effective, however, requires that it be active.

Active listening is advocated to improve the communication process. People must carefully listen to both the words and the feelings being communicated. If a speaker's words say one thing and the feeling conveyed is not consistent, it is appropriate to ask about the misalignment between the two. For example, a yes response to a favor accompanied by a deep sigh and eye roll might warrant some probing questions such as "It seems that you have some reservations. Can we talk about it?" In addition, it is a good policy to repeat back what you have heard to confirm that you received the intended message.

Covey's message has been clear: "Seek first to understand, and then be understood." Only by actively listening can you begin to understand the other's point. Listening means that you are not preparing your rebuttal when there is a pause by the speaker. It means that you are truly attempting to receive the message that they are sending.

Furthermore, this means that you are fully present. Children are good reminding us of the importance of being fully present. When a toddler is telling a story and the listener is not fully present, the toddler will often simply turn the "listener's" head with his or her hands to make eye contact. To be more fully present, try not to multi-task or become distracted while listening to someone. To be a better active listener, try not to speak and listen at the same time. And using nods can encourage the speaker and communicates that you are listening.

6. Mind your body language--and that of others.

People speak volumes before they even open their mouths. The communication process is comprised of three elements. Body language comprises 60 percent of the process, tone of voice comprises 30 percent and words comprise only 10 percent. This certainly highlights the importance of the nonverbal elements. Body language conveys messages beyond the words actually spoken. When the body language communicates one message and the actual words another, care must be taken to place more emphasis on the message conveyed by the body language. It is easier to lie or mislead with words than it is with body language.

We can often take our cue from others when reading their body language and realize that we, too, are communicating with our own body language. The nonverbal messages can overpower the verbal. Without realizing it, your face often gives your real message away.

Attention to what others are saying is often conveyed by leaning forward in the chair or leaning into the conversation. Making eye contact also conveys interest and implies that one is listening. Listeners that are slumping in their seats appear inattentive (and perhaps even bored).
Crossing arms can signal a closed mind. Care should be taken, then, to be aware of the messages that you are sending nonverbally.

Parting Thoughts

Seventy-five percent of the manager's time is spent communicating. While a portion of this time is spent talking and a portion is spent listening--both are equally important. A link has been found between turnover and effective downward communication. Those organizations with more effective downward communication have lower turnover rates. In addition, job satisfaction is greater and productivity is higher with more effective communication. Attention to the above tips can enable everyone to improve their own ability to communicate more effectively--thereby enhancing their career development and the organization's performance.

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