

Why is Communication So Hard? (Part 1)

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Have you ever been misunderstood? Sure. It happens to all of us. It's just that the negative repercussions can be devastating to a leader, especially if that leader is YOU!

Why is clear communication so difficult? First, let's think about the outgoing message.

What I want to say. This seems straightforward. You probably think that what you want to communicate is pretty clear. No way that can be messed up, is there?

What I think I said. You knew what you wanted to say, right? Well, didn't you say what you wanted to say? You think so, but you're not sure? Actually, what comes out of our mouths often isn't exactly the same as the thought that was floating around in our heads, is it?

What I actually said. Wait a minute—is what you actually said really different from what you thought you said? Oh, more than you can imagine! Let me give an example. Just yesterday, I was talking about plans I had for Tuesday, yet I spoke "Thursday" into the phone. My wife was listening and corrected me. How could that have come out of my mouth as "Thursday" when I so clearly had the image of a calendar column labeled "Tuesday" in my brain?

Are you beginning to get the point? Can you see how your efforts to communicate a simple concept can contribute to misunderstandings?

Ah, but the listener messes up sometimes, too, right? Sure, the incoming message is subject to a variety of misinterpretations! But how does the listener know what's accurate and what's a mistake?

What the listener wanted to hear. We all have expectations. We don't have to hear more than a short phrase for our brains to fill in the rest of the sentence, paragraph, and entire concept!

What the listener thought he heard. Oops, the listener realized that what you were saying was different from what he expected to hear, but it took him a few words to catch on. Now he's trying to interpret a different message and—oops, he thinks he missed a few critical concepts. "Could you go back and...." Oh well, he'll catch up in a minute.

What meaning the listener made from what he thought he heard. Did all that register properly? There were a few words you used that had a special connotation that you wanted to make sure the listener understood. Oh, and there were a few words that you sloppily selected—their distinction wasn't all that important. The listener still probably understood the gist of what you said, right? Maybe!

Can you see why communication is so difficult? If there were just these three possibilities of how the outgoing message can be misunderstood, and if there were only these three ways the incoming message can be distorted...let's see, if you do the math properly that's nine different ways you can be misunderstood!

Have I convinced you?

So how do you improve the probability that what you communicate and what the listener hears comes close to the concept you want to transmit? Good question!

Think about how you normally deal with that question for the next few days, and I'll work to formulate an answer that I can clearly communicate next week! (I hope!)

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