

Why is Communication So Hard? (Part 2)

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It's amazing that we humans communicate as well as we do! There is so much opportunity to misunderstand each other!

If you missed last week's article, contact me. I identified nine ways two people can miscommunicate. Yet most of us spend our days working to share ideas with others!

This week, I offer some methods for improving the probability that what you communicate and what the listener hears achieves the desired objective. The following suggestions may seem like common sense. Unfortunately, some just aren't all that common!

Build strong relationships. Although we sometimes mess up our communication with those who know us well, our odds are worse with a stranger. Not only will close friends and colleagues have the foundational connection to understand you better, they will be more likely to forgive your mistakes.

Visualize the desired outcome. Before you attempt the communication, think about how you want the listener to be different after the communication. What effect are you seeking? New awareness? Different feelings? Some specific action step taken? Knowing clearly what you want to achieve with the communication will guide what you say and how you say it.

Provide context. Realize that the listener may not understand the circumstances as you do. Background may help the individual process the significance of the concept you share. If there are unusual previous circumstances that are affecting this situation, take the time to explain them.

Be animated. Studies have shown that facial expression and tone of voice are relatively more important than the words you say. The relative ratio is about 6 to 3 to 1.

About 60% of what we communicate is transmitted through body language and facial expression. Using your hands, your face, and especially your eyes puts passion into your communication!

About 30% of what we communicate is through tone of voice. Although in-person communication is usually most desirable, the telephone is preferable over e-mail, especially for anything that carries the slightest risk of emotional interpretation. Use e-mail only for communicating unemotional information!

Guys often underestimate the importance of non-verbal communication. When faced with a misunderstanding, they may clench their teeth and slowly grind out "What I said was...." Delivered with an air of condescension, this focus on the words alone limits their effectiveness.

Build an outline and rehearse it. If you have a difficult message to communicate, especially one to a large group, organize your thoughts into an outline or even a partial script. Practice it alone several times. Then ask a trusted friend to observe you and offer feedback. This is particularly helpful when the communication involves significant change. A good handout with a place for making notes can be a valuable supplement!

Invite feedback with open-ended questions. To help ensure the desired outcome is achieved, ask the person to share the impact of what you've communicated. For example, "How do you imagine this new information will influence your work?" Encourage the individual to come back to you if there are problems or questions that arise later.

Communication is a critical skill for any leader. I encourage you to reread this article and select an approach or two you'd like to improve. Then go to a trusted colleague, confess your interest, and seek his or her support in offering encouragement and accountability.

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