

What's Missing in Your Communication?

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2007, published in the Houston Daily Journal on Saturday, May 12, 2007

“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” It’s the famous line in “Cool Hand Luke,” first uttered by Strother Martin, captain of the chain gang. The line is later mockingly delivered by star Paul Newman.

Even organizations that are quite good may have a failure to communicate. Most teams have individuals who tend to deny, ignore, and pretend. They avoid accurately describing current reality (deny). They fail to confront less than desirable performance (ignore). Or they hope that things will get better on their own (pretend).

In last week’s Wall Street Journal, I read an article entitled “In Praise of Less Praise.” Writer Jeffrey Zaslow quotes a converted “feel good” consultant who had finally realized that “unearned praise is condescending and destructive” and “we’ve ruined our kids by celebrating mediocrity.”

I strongly agree with that contention. Yet I lead what skeptics might call a “feel good” experience myself. I conduct with my clients an activity that celebrates the special capabilities of each member of a team. Each person first takes the StrengthsFinder Profile, an assessment tool that identifies their top five (of thirty-four) “talent themes.” Each talent theme describes naturally recurring thoughts, feelings, and behaviors individuals have in response to the routine situations of life.

Each person provides examples of how these talent themes accurately describe his or her normal behaviors. The rest of the team then provides additional examples affirming the individual. It is a very powerful bonding activity, reinforcing the natural contributions each person makes to the team.

Some individuals experience a renewed appreciation for what they may have been taking for granted. The increased attention placed on his or her “normal” behaviors stimulates new insights and possibilities about how to apply their abilities to future needs of the organization.

Successful teams encourage each person to contribute their unique skills. Faced with a particularly difficult situation, the person with the greatest skill in that area is often asked to address the need.

I asked myself, “What’s the difference between the mutual support provided by members of really strong teams and the false praise described in the Wall Street Journal article.”

First, the compliments on strong contributors are deserved. Second, healthy teams encourage giving and receiving candid feedback, even on unproductive behaviors.

Sadly, many teams have unintentionally developed a culture that is not safe. The truth cannot be openly communicated. And since “the law of reciprocity” is alive and well in our society, if one member of the team withholds or disguises what should be said, others reciprocate. Soon, the whole team starts denying, ignoring, or pretending—and they aren’t even aware of it!

What can you do to counteract this common phenomenon? I suggest you share this article, explaining that you’d like to start improving the quality of open communication on your team.

Ask each person to answer these three questions, providing blatantly honest answers. Deliver the responses to one person who will collate them anonymously and bring them back to the team for further conversation.

1. On a scale from 1 to 10, how receptive and how honest are you being in team conversations?
2. What’s preventing you from being more receptive and honest?
3. What should we do to create an atmosphere that encourages more complete openness and honesty?

Provide all the responses to all the team members. Together, you’ll find a way to start improving!

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