

Effective Communication Skills Part 1

Do you make these 5 mistakes when you speak to your team?

I recall one of my degree modules. It sticks in my mind, not because it was a startlingly good module but rather it was the exact opposite. I suppose it rounded out my education but why we were doing it is still beyond me. Not only was it a dull subject but our lecturer had a dull monotonic voice that imparted zero enthusiasm for the subject as he poured information all over us. I returned to a conscious existence only when his chalk clicked on the board telling me that there were more notes to take.

So what happens when you talk with your team? Do they stay in the room with you? Do you communicate effectively with them or do they respond to you as if you were that lecturer I mentioned? There is more to building a team than just being having effective communication skills, but they are vital if the other aspects of team building are to work.

Effective Team Communications

This four part series on Effective Communication Skills is about what happens when we speak and how we can become responsible speakers and responsible listeners. Why responsible? Because it's about us taking responsibility for understanding. It will help you to engage with your team and convey information to them in a way that makes a difference. It will help you in many other situations such as sales conversations and one-on-one meetings not just working with your team.

The first in the series looks at 5 common problems that can arise in our communications style. The subsequent parts will unpack the key principles of effective communications skills.

1. Do you overwhelm your people with words?

Frequently people are so anxious, self-focused or simply so short of time that they spew words out like a burst dam. Often they are afraid that if they pause for breath the listener will nuke them with an objection or just tell them to go away. The result: they overwhelm the listener. Then when things are not understood or subsequently go awry they can be heard saying "Well I told them what they needed to know!"

What happens to the overwhelmed listener? They have no time to gather their thoughts and "clue-in" to what is being said, nor are they able to find a way in to clarify the situation, to get more information or ask for help in understanding. The "communication" is a one way flow. The longer it flows the less relevant it becomes to the listeners who switch off. When that happens the speaker's frustration rises because no-one is taking any notice and he tries to beat them into submission with words and a positive feedback loop kicks off.

Positive feedback may sound good but it's bad. It is the reason for those painful whistles and screams that cry out of a PA system when it's not set up right. The whistle is picked up by the microphone and is amplified, emerging from the PA only to be picked up and amplified some more. It keeps on going until somebody turns the volume down. Jimmy Hendrix

managed to make music with it but most of us don't have that skill and it results in an objectionable noise.

What to do about it?

Relax

Don't get wound up about it and make sure that you have time. Avoid being in a rush.

Quality not Quantity

People can only take in so much information at a time so think out what they need to know, limit what you say and give them opportunity to ask questions.

Follow-up

If there is more information to convey then organise a follow up session when everyone is prepared to go into the detail.

2. Do you tell them only what interests you?

The question here is what is more important to you? That your team understands what you are sharing with them and commits to an appropriate response or, that you are able to dump what you know or care about or think is relevant on them, in the hope that they can do something with it?

That path leads to the team switching off because you have failed to address their needs. Your message will seem less than relevant to them and will tend to be ignored because of this, if not because they cannot work out how to respond appropriately.

Whatever you are talking to your team about, they will have a perspective, concerns, objections or insights on the matter. All of which will be important to them. Key to engaging them is finding out what they think and what is important to them and addressing those issues. You may have to adapt what you have to say accordingly. That is not to say you have to change things on the fly but draw things out or emphasise particular points in a way that addresses their questions.

What to do about it?

Engage

Seek to engage in a dialogue not a monologue. Be equal parties in the conversation.

Ask questions

This will enable you to see if you are getting your point or your information across.

Invite questions

Do this as you go along. It will help your team help you tell them what they need to know.

3. Do you ignore the communication markers?

Communications markers are the non-verbal cues that your listener gives when you are attempting to communicate with them. In face to face situations its primarily body language and tone of voice. There are markers in other forms of communications as well. These

markers give you clues as to what your listener is thinking. Being sensitive to them will help you steer a course that keeps them on-side and engaged. Ignore them at your peril.

I remember once visiting the toilet at work to discover my boss trapped in a cubicle by Xavier, one of our sales guys. He was taking the opportunity, because my boss could not go anywhere, to overwhelm him with words. This demonstrated the lack of sensitivity that was the reason that this was the only place Xavier could get my boss' attention. It also meant that he could happily, if unhelpfully ignore all the communication markers, which may well have meant that the conversation eventually erupted in the positive feedback loop of violent language!

Don't be so self focused or unaware that you ignore the communications markers from your team. To do so means that you have joined Xavier standing outside that toilet cubicle. You won't get anywhere fast because you will miss the signals that say "We have had enough." "We don't understand." "Can you say that again please." "We want you to stop." "I have to go now."

What to do about it?

Avoid being self focused

Think about and interact with your team as you talk with them.

Be concerned for the other person

Do your utmost to make them feel an important part of the conversation.

Learn the physical signals

There are good books that can help you understand body language but some of it is very obvious. You won't miss it if you maintain your awareness of the other person.

Listen for the audio cues

Communications markers are audible as well as physical. Listen for changes in tone of voice.

4. Do you assume they have understood you?

If we are self-focused or simply concerned to "dump" our message and rush off it is very easy to assume that people will have understood what we have to say. It may be that we are a "detail person" and simply overwhelm people with that detail, forgetting to provide any context. There are any number of reasons why we may prevent people from understanding us. Then of course, there is whatever is going on with the listener that means they miss the point, get the wrong end of the stick or are just unable to "tune in".

Factors that may further obscure understanding are abstract concepts and our attempts to be diplomatic. I remember one of the first staff appraisals I ever conducted. I was diplomatically attempting to "correct" my team member's approach and attitude, which had shown up in his frequent conflict with another team member. I was so diplomatic that in the end he thought that I had complimented him. Chalk that one up to experience!

An extra dimension to be aware of is attempting to communicate cross-culturally. We may be speaking with people for whom our language is not their first language. Then issues of vocabulary, idiom and style can impede our attempts to communicate, even when we have everything else right.

Whatever the reason, there is always the possibility that others do not fully understand what we have said, its implications and the need for action. The consequence is misunderstanding, confusion, incorrect action and even conflict. A man called Wiio declared a law of communication, which essentially is: If it can go wrong, it will go wrong; if it can be misunderstood it will be misunderstood.

What to do about it?

Keep it simple

Use plain language and avoid idioms and phrases that assume knowledge on the part of the listeners

Make space for understanding

Speak in shorter segments so that the listener can assimilate what is said before you move on to the next idea. That will also provide scope for them to ask questions.

Ask questions

This gives the listener the opportunity to confirm understanding and seek clarification.

5. Do you assume that it is the listener's responsibility to understand?

"If they don't understand they should ask" may seem sensible, but it has at least two flaws. The first is that in general, people tend not to ask out of fear; fear of looking silly or perhaps fear of you.

The other is that they may not fully understand that they do not understand. If they have missed or misunderstood something then it may all seem to make sense – until later that is. Beyond the various issues already discussed, when things seem really clear to us it can be difficult to appreciate that people may not have understood or perhaps cannot understand. After all it is so obvious. At the other extreme we may feel that it's not our job to "wet-nurse" the team. However, if it is in our own interests that the team understand what we are saying then it is in our own interest to take responsibility to ensure that they understand.

What can you do about it?

Make understanding your goal

Measure success differently. Communication is only ever achieved when the other person understands and can act accordingly.

Avoid assumptions

Many actions fail due to assumptions, especially the unwritten or unthinking kind. It's best to either avoid them, declare them or test them. Test understanding, it's the best way.

Partnership

Communication really only succeeds when both sides are in an equal partnership that allows understanding to flow. Encourage your listeners to participate in that partnership, you may need to give them permission to join in.

What Can You Do Today?

Turn your next team communication into a dialogue. Ask the team specific questions to test understanding and encourage them to ask you questions. Try it and see what happens. Follow up by reading the remaining posts in this Effective Communications Skills series. They will unpack some of the issues touched on in this post and delve into a little more detail. All with the aim of providing you with practical guidance on Effective Communications.