

The Top Five Pitfalls of Communication!

Or Having a Communication Breakdown

For the past twenty years, I have taught people how to communicate effectively. I am constantly observing how people interact with each other, how efficiently they listen, how effectively they respond. Even though communication has become more complex, and even though there is a massive amount of information to be exchanged, good communication skills continue to be a prerequisite for developing a more congenial and collaborative environment, at home or at work. Now more than ever, it is absolutely essential for people to communicate in ways that foster collaboration and cooperation. So when a friend asked me to identify the major pitfalls of communication, I had to stop and consider what the most common ones are. The more we discussed it, the more fascinating the exercise became. I had to really focus my thinking on what we do (or do not do) that breaks down communication. I came up with the following:

We often give our messages backwards...

We often give our messages backwards or ask questions when we should be making statements. Is that your idea of a report? Is that all you had planned to say to the customer? Why wasn't that work done on time? These messages express quite definitely that what the person did was not good enough. And to make matters worse, the problem cannot be fixed because we have not provided the criteria necessary to do so. When our messages do not clearly indicate what we want, others are forced to interpret or guess at what they think is required. Without the benefit of direct and clear statements, people cannot possibly meet our expectations because they do not know what they are. Telling it backwards establishes fault, creates a defensive attitude, is counter productive and does nothing to promote an atmosphere of cooperation.

We think people think like us

We think people think like us and assume that when we speak, our messages are clear. How could it be otherwise? Unfortunately, we occasionally forget to consider that people come from different backgrounds and cultures and that their language and ways of expressing themselves may be very different from ours. In addition, their interpretations of what we say may be totally inconsistent with what we intended. It is not realistic to assume that everyone grasps the same meaning from any particular statement. Because we do not all think alike, it is necessary to ask questions and request feedback in order to establish that our intent is clear.

We like to be "right".

We like to be right and there is a belief that winning at all costs is worth it. One of the greatest myths is that assertive behaviour results in people getting what they want when they want it; that winning arguments and getting in the last word is the ultimate goal. If we allow ourselves to accept this myth, then there can be no dialogue and no communication. There is a fine line between aggressive and assertive behaviour and having to be right all the time, crosses that line. Assertive behaviour involves negotiating and problem solving. It recognizes motivation, personal self worth and respect for differences. Although we like to be right, it does not always bring us the results we want in the long run.

We speak of "the way" rather than "a way"

That's how I see it and that's how it is. We often state our views as non-negotiable - the bottom line. This behaviour inhibits any kind of dialogue. It discourages innovative thinking and creativity. Listening is an integral part of any communicating process and in no way suggests that we are giving in or losing control. Assertive communication encourages negotiating, problem solving, planning and discussing. It recognizes that we are open to new ideas and perspectives and realizes that we cannot accept or incorporate all of them. In addition, the final decision is an informed decision because it is based on a collaborative process.

We fail to appreciate that there are always choices

Although most behaviour is habitual, we can condition ourselves to change how we behave in different situations. Assertive training identifies that there are always three choices. Passive behaviour maintains difficult relationships, aggressive behaviour escalates difficult exchanges, and assertive behaviour strengthens effectiveness and maintains respectful relationships. When we react without processing information, we can get ourselves into trouble. Sometimes it is more effective to incorporate a new behaviour into our repertoire, especially if that behaviour results in a more congenial and productive exchange.

Communication Breakdowns can be avoided. Assertive communication recognizes not only our words but the impact of those words. It respects others and provides the opportunity for open and honest dialogue. More information requires more communication. It is time we learned how to avoid the pitfalls.

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