

## **What's in a word?**

### **Five key principles of effective workplace communication for leaders.**

Effective Communication is the lifeblood of any organization. It supports organizational structures, systems and procedures. It determines the way information is shared between departments and the various strata within an organization. It also has a fundamental role in determining the human environment of an organization. Many times, problems of demotivation, disorganization, and lowered morale can be traced to lack of effective communication between the people concerned. Breakdowns in communication can cost the company a high price in terms of efficiency, quality of work, and human resources.

### **The map is not the territory**

An important concept that we constantly need to bear in mind when communicating is that people react to their perceptions and interpretations of what is being communicated rather than the communication itself. This idea comes from the field of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), which is a school of psychology that seeks to understand and change the ways we are “programmed” to interpret reality and react to it based on multiple levels of experience. In a nutshell, we perceive events according to specific filters that tend to generalize, associate, distort, and interpret the information we receive. Some of these filters are: memories of previous experiences, values and beliefs, attitudes, decisions and meta-programs which are patterns we use to determine which information gets through.

These filters create a subjective internal representation of the event with the corresponding emotional and physiological state. For example an already nervous flyer on board a plane got a panic attack simply because he heard another passenger greet an acquaintance named Jack saying “Hi Jack!”.

The above has serious implications regarding the quality of our communication. Unless we appreciate the complexity and subjectivity of the way communication is sent and received by people we can very often fail to get our message across the way we want. A common reaction we get when we communicate with people, especially when we need to tell them something unpleasant is defensiveness and disconfirmation. When this happens it is a clear indication that the recipient of our communication sees us as a threat and self-protection becomes more urgent and important than listening.

The following communication principles are five simple and effective guidelines that can help us improve our interpersonal communication and make it more effective, lower resistance and increase cooperation and motivation in people.

### **Issue focused not person focused**

This principle refers to the ability to address the issue at hand, or the behaviour that is causing the issue rather than characteristics or personal traits of the individual. Issue focused communication addresses things or behaviour that can be changed or controlled. So rather than telling someone that they are dictatorial or domineering you could tell them that they left you out of the decision making process or that they made several decisions without consulting you. The absence of a meaningful referent is the major weakness of person focused communication.

This principle applies even when we are communicating something positive. Rather than saying “you are a wonderful person” you may say “I really appreciate how you went out of your way to accommodate me”.

The key point here is that statements that are person focused are more likely to evoke defensiveness since they strike at the heart of a person’s identity “the being”. Issue focused communication on the other hand addresses “the doing” and as it is one step removed it is easier for the person to consider its validity.

### **Descriptive not judgemental**

The tendency to evaluate others in our communication is especially difficult to avoid when issues are emotionally charged or when a person is feeling threatened. Judgmental communication places labels on other individuals or their behaviour. Typical comments that represent this communication are “you are doing it wrong”, or “you are no good at this”. The main problem with this type of communication is that it perpetuates itself. A person you have labeled is most likely to label you back, possibly triggering off defensive behaviours in both parties, making constructive communication almost impossible to achieve.

The alternative to judgemental communication is descriptive communication and it involves three steps.

1. First, describe as objectively as you can your observation of what has happened or of the behaviour you think needs to be changed. Make sure that this observation can be confirmed objectively and is not subject to your opinion or judgment. For example you may say “You have met fewer targets this month than anyone else in the team”.
2. Next describe your reactions to that behaviour or describe its consequence e.g. “I am concerned about our productivity”.
3. Finally suggest an alternative that is more acceptable or invite the person to come up with one themselves. E.g. “I suggest that you identify what hindered you from meeting the deadlines so that we can overcome the obstacles”.

### **Validating not dismissive**

Validating communication respects people’s intelligence as well as their need to be valued, listened to and understood. As a result it increases motivation and boosts self-esteem. On the other hand dismissive communication conveys

indifference and superiority and diminishes the importance of the individual. A typical example is “If you knew what I knew you wouldn’t talk like that”, or “If you had asked me I would have told you that it wouldn’t work”.

Validating communication on the other hand really conveys respect and a willingness to be open to the other person’s views. It distinguishes between facts and perceptions and seeks to point out the value and importance of what other people say. An example of a validating statement would be, “I have my own opinions but I really would like to know what you think”.

### **Specific not general**

Specific statements are effective because they are clearer to understand and easier to act upon. Normally, the more specific our statements the more we can motivate change. A general statement such as “you need to manage your time better”, can be changed to a more specific statement such as “yesterday you spent two hours organizing the shifts when this could have been done by your assistant”.

General communication also consists of “absolutes”, “extremes”, or “either-or’s”. The problem with these statements is that they shut the door to alternatives or possibilities, for example “the French are all snobs”, “You never consider my opinion”, or “it’s either him or me”. These statements are likely to block positive communication and increase defensiveness, resistance and outright denial.

### **Active listening not a one-way delivery**

The fifth principle and probably the most important, focuses on the need for communication to be listening-based rather than a monologue. We often take this principle for granted simply because we hear so much about its importance. Yet, in many instances, few people are able to listen well and show a real understanding to what is being communicated. Listening closely and actively to what a person has to say gives them the message that they matter, and that what they have to say is important to us. Active listening deeply engages the listener and results in well thought out and appropriate responses. These consist of:

- Statements of empathy that show a genuine and thorough understanding of a person’s emotional and contextual reality from their frame of reference.
- Summarising statements that help focus both speaker and listener and ensure good understanding.
- Questions that seek to elaborate, clarify, reflect, and repeat when necessary.
- Linking statements that identify patterns, themes and issues in a person’s communication and connect them in a meaningful way for the speaker to consider.

Observing these five principles will go a long way towards improving the way we communicate. Naturally each principle needs its relevant body language and voice tone for us to be credible and effective. Moreover it needs to be backed by

a firm belief in the respect and value of each individual. The good news is that by good coaching and practice such skills can be learned and eventually internalized within our behavioural repertoire.

**Patrick J. Psaila is a freelance psychologist and personal and professional development consultant. He is the director of WorkAssist – Staff Support and Development Services that offers counselling, coaching and mentoring, and personal and professional development programmes. Patrick may be contacted on 7988 7982 or by e-mail [pjpsaila@workassistmalta.com](mailto:pjpsaila@workassistmalta.com) or through his website [www.workassistmalta.com](http://www.workassistmalta.com)**

