

NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR CORPORATE LEADERS



■ Raphael E. Lapin

In today's climate in which companies need to reduce their workforce to below critical levels, they are at the same time faced with the difficult task of maintaining even higher levels of efficiency and productivity. Studies indicate that approximately 50 percent of organizational teams and business partnerships are unsuccessful in achieving their objectives due to poor communication. Now more than ever, superior communication skills are crucial for managers to optimize team performance and partnership collaboration. In this month's column, we provide three tips that will help you to improve communication in your business relationships.

DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING

When we are engaged in a meaningful exchange, it is not enough that we understand the other party. They also need to *know* that we have understood them *before we can engage in any further dialogue with them*. The way to effectively demonstrate this to them is by paraphrasing how we have understood them and checking with them for accuracy. Only then has the circle of the communication been completed. To illustrate this, let us say that Alice is complaining passionately about team members not delivering assignments on time and how this delays the project. To paraphrase you might say "Alice, what I am hearing is that when assignments are not delivered on time, you become concerned about a delay in this project and disappointing our customers, is that accurate?" By checking your understanding, you are also allowing her to correct you and rectify any misunderstandings at the outset. By doing so, Alice now knows that she has been

fully heard and understood and will now be receptive to listen to you. She also has recognized that you are putting in effort to understand her, which will encourage her to engage further. This technique is absolutely fundamental to effective communication.

ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

Often in a communication, there is a lot of information that is missing. People may, for instance, say that they feel overwhelmed but not explain why, or that they feel unfairly treated but not provide a reason. We need to ask clarifying questions to uncover that missing information and achieve a deeper level of understanding. If an employee would say, as an example: "My manager made me do it", then a follow up clarifying question is: "What was it specifically that your manager said or did that made you do it?" This expands the scope of the discussion and introduces new information, history and context. Always listen for information that is missing and use that to guide your line of questioning. This will also help to keep the conversation focused. Make sure however, that your questions are driven by an authentic desire to achieve better understanding. If they are asked in a challenging and judgmental way, it will sound more like an interrogation which will hamper them and obstruct productive dialogue.

LOOK FOR INCONSISTENCIES

When we communicate, we are doing so not only verbally but also through our body language, voice intonation and facial expressions. Listening attentively means being aware of and carefully observing the non verbal cues as well. These are necessary to understand the complete content of their message. Look for inconsistencies and incongruence. Are the person's non-verbal cues

congruent with the content of his/her message? If not, you should expose the incongruence in a non-judgmental way and provide feedback. Let's say that they are talking about the incredible stress they are under while at the same time sitting in a very relaxed manner. They are sending a confusing or incomplete message. Upon observing this, you should raise the inconsistency and say to them: "As I listen to you talking about your stress I can't help noticing that you appear very relaxed. It would be helpful for me to understand this better as I am not sure I am getting the full picture." This then will elicit more information from them that will help you see a larger picture and get a more complete message.

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A good opportunity to learn this skill is to observe interviews on television and look for inconsistencies between the interviewee's verbal and non-verbal messages. You will be surprised at what you see and how much you learn. Training yourself to observe and be aware of the non-verbal cues and how they match with the verbal ones, will go a long way in making you a master of communication.

Becoming a skilled communicator will provide you with an enormous advantage in any situation in which you need to work with people to get things done. The investment to acquire those skills is small compared to the returns. Start by practicing the skills in this column until they become intuitive. You will then have made significant progress in becoming an effective communicator.

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