

Communication Alert! How Behavior Impacts Clarity

By Karel Murray

According to E. H. Schein, Consultant, the most important thing for people to understand is what goes on inside their own heads. If we enter into a conversation without knowing how we assert our own feelings and biases, we won't be able to tell whether the information we are receiving is based on reality or our perceptions.

As human beings, we can't help but filter all communication through our own personal filters which include prejudgments, expectations and alert our defenses if we hear or read a statement a certain way. Because of our tendency towards misperception of what happened or why it happened, we may "allow" ourselves to respond emotionally to our interpretation without being aware that it is based on incorrect information. As a result, if we don't check whether our observation and emotional reaction were correct and appropriate, we may act rationally but make the situation worse. How do you think an argument can brew to a boiling point after discussing the type of cheese you may want to incorporate into a salad?

To illustrate and imbed what E. H. Schein has discovered, I've often used the "telephone game" in my training sessions. I whisper a short five sentence statement into the ear of a volunteer. That person then repeats the statement to another person and tells them exactly what I told them. This whispering process is continued through 10 people. Much like gossip, don't you think? Someone hears something interesting, they pass it along to another person, and before you know it, when you hear the information it is the truth, nothing but the truth, so help you God!

Wrong.

In the last year, having conducted this quick experiment at least 25 times, only *once* has the first person repeated exactly what I told them. Usually, the first person leaves off at least one detail, often more than that. 100% of the time, the participants return a substantially altered, shorten version of what was initially said.

Building relationships based on clear communication requires involves the following:

1. We must make sure our perceptions of a situation, conversation or written material are accurate. That means you need to validate the information, seek additional clarification before deciding the action you wish to take.
2. Clear communication can be achieved by paraphrasing back what an individual tells you so that you can be sure what you heard is accurate, or by asking follow-up open ended questions until you receive all of the facts. It may take a bit more time, but you will dramatically increase the reliability and accuracy of the communication exchange.
3. React appropriately. Better yet, wait to react until you have all the information in hand. Our initial response may be an emotional one. Learn to hold that in check until you really know whether you have something to react to emotionally or not!
4. Believe that there will be a positive resolution to any communication issue. A forward looking outlook can help smooth interpersonal relationships. There isn't anything that can't be fixed unless the other party doesn't cooperate.
5. Finally, learn to deal with people problems directly. It is often the behavior of the individual that is cause the uproar. Address those behaviors directly and you are well on your way to smoothing out the communication process and establishing a better likelihood of a positive resolution.

Let's talk about behaviors for a minute. I find that a person's ability to communication well depends upon the type of individual they are speaking to and how well they match up personality wise. Have you ever noticed how you "shut down" when an irritating personality commandeers thirty minutes of your time at a social gathering? One quick look over your shoulder tells you that there is no one around to participate in an escape and the only thing you can do is endure the situation?

To be an effective communicator, we need to understand how others perceive us. They will respond equally to who we are as well as what we say. Therefore, once we have a clear understanding of our effect on others, we can then refine our ability to establish a positive connection - both verbally and in written form.

Do others feel you are a person who is...

- Self centered, extremely dominant and untrustworthy - A handle with care type of personality?

- A natural leader with an impulsive personality (exciting, highly volatile, and quick to make decisions)?
- Bold and adventuresome, willing take chances?
- Fresh, lively, charming, amusing, practical, and always interesting?
- Kind, considerate, and understanding?
- Sensible, cautious, careful & practical?
- Extremely loyal to friends and who expects the same loyalty in return?
- Painstaking, fussy, cautious, extremely careful slow and steady plodder?
- Shy, nervous, and indecisive - someone who needs looking after?

By learning to target your communication effectively so that you can enhance or overcome the perception others may have, you will find interactions will be more lively and honest. Understanding yourself is the first step to building lasting relationships.

When clarity is not evident in the way you relate to others, red flags start appearing to let you know there is a breakdown in communication. You may feel that there are hidden agendas (unspoken messages between two people or two groups). This may result in resentment, back-stabbing and overall lack of trust. It is most frequently demonstrated through extensive complaining and prolonged discouragement by the other party. Learn to dig out these issues, lay them on the table and address them directly.

Another classic red flag is the “not here now” look. You can tell when others have stopped listening. They are looking over your shoulder for someone else, never making eye contact, not asking follow up questions, or just appear distracted. Terminate the discussion; evaluate what was being said by the other person and their corresponding body language. If you have concerns about the verbal exchange, address them truthfully. Check again to see if your type of personality clashes with the other individual. If the relationship is worth building, re-contact that person and begin again.

There is a logical process to help establish clear communication. By following the steps below, you will have a much better chance of establishing a clean channel of discussion:

1. Develop trust and rapport before any communication begins. When a situation arises, you will only have three logical routes you can take:
 - a. Try to change the behavior of the other party.
 - b. Try to change the structure of the conflict.
 - c. Change your own behavior.

2. Determine what the actual situation is.
 - a. What are the known facts of the situation?
 - b. Why or how did this situation occur in the first place?
 - c. Have I obtained as much information as possible to make an informed decision and action for this situation?
 - d. Have I involved all who have a right to have input or involved in making this decision?

3. Remember that individual perception of the situation is based on personal beliefs and expectations.
 - a. To whom do you or the other person owe loyalty?
 - b. What are the underlying issues causing the situation?
 - c. How would you define the problem if you were not involved?

4. Confront the situation which includes listening, feedback, and questions.
 - a. What do you want to achieve as a result of your decision?
 - b. What is the worse case scenario for your preferred alternative to see how it will affect others?

As you work through the quandary of implementing a process that will help you be the most effective communicator you can be, remember to be conscious of your personal style and aware of your impact on others. It is essential to remove your “filters” and keep a reservoir of good feelings in place for the other party, regardless of the outcome of the communication. You can do this by setting a good example and recognizing that we all see the “truth” differently.

And as you address each issue, make sure you provide the other party a way to save face. This means you need to be open to changes in the discussion and communicate in an unconditionally constructive manner. By seeing the issues from their point of view and giving their interests the weight they deserve, you will not only create a fluid and trusting communication environment, you may very well build a positive relationship for life.

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