

# COMMUNICATION – AN IMPORTANT SKILL OF MODERN MANAGERS

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**Abstract:**

*Communication is best achieved through simple planning and control, that's why a good communication is so important. Ambiguity in communication can generate a lot of inconvenience and mistakes. Mistakes suppose waste (money, or time, or any resources)*

*How to practice a good communications in enterprises? How can you be sure that your communication is efficient and you will gain a good feed back? .Why do we use oral communication in the 21's century enterprises? Those are questions to be answered in this article.*

**Key words:** *communications, enterprises, ambiguity, efficiency*

**JEL Classification:** M0

## ***What does a good communication mean? How to avoid mistakes?***

Communication is best achieved through simple planning and control; this article looks at approaches which might help you to do this and specifically at meetings, where conversations need particular care.

Most conversations sort of drift along; in business, this is wasteful; as a manager, you seek communication rather than chatter.

To ensure an efficient and effective conversation, there are three considerations:

- you must make your message understood;
- you must receive/understand the intended message sent to you;
- you should exert some control over the flow of the communication.

Thus you must learn to listen as well as to speak. Those who dismiss this as a mere platitude are already demonstrating an indisposition to listening: the phrase may be trite, but the message is hugely significant to your effectiveness as a manager. If you do not explicitly develop the skill of listening, you may not hear the suggestion/information which should launch you to fame and fortune.

As a manager (concerned with getting things done) your view of words should be pragmatic rather than philosophical. Thus, words mean not what the dictionary says they do but rather what the speaker intended. One of the conditions of a good communication is to avoid ambiguity.

Suppose your manager gives to you an instruction which contains an ambiguity which neither of you notice and which results in you producing entirely the wrong product. Who is at fault? The answer must be: who cares? Your time has been wasted, the needed product is delayed (or dead); attributing blame may be a satisfying (or defensive) exercise but it does not address the problem. In everything you say or hear, you must look out for possible misunderstanding and clarify the ambiguity

The greatest source of difficulty is that words often have different meanings depending upon context and/or culture. Thus, a "dry" country lacks either water or alcohol; "suspenders" keep up either stockings or trousers (pants); a "funny" meeting is either humorous or disconcerting; a "couple" is either a few or exactly two. If you recognize that there is a potential misunderstanding, you must stop the conversation and ask for the valid interpretation.

A second problem is that some people simply make mistakes. Your job is not simply to spot ambiguities but also to counter inconsistencies. Thus if I now advocate that the wise manager should seek out (perhaps humorous) books on entomology (creepy crawlies) you would deduce that the word should have been etymology. More usual, however, is that in thinking over several alternatives you may suffer a momentary confusion and say one of them while meaning another. There are good scientific reasons (to do with the associative nature of the brain) why this happens, you have to be aware of the potential problem and counter for it.

Finally, of course, you may simply mishear. The omission of a simple word could be devastating. For instance, how long would you last as an explosives engineer if you failed to hear a simple negative in: "whatever happens next you must [not] cut the blue wi..."?

So, the problem is this: the word has multiple meanings, it might not be the one intended, and you may have misheard it in the first place - how do you know what the speaker meant?

#### Rule 1: PLAY BACK for confirmation

Simple, you ask for confirmation. You say "let me see if I have understood correctly, you are saying that ..." and you rephrase what the speaker said. If this "play back" version is acknowledged as being correct by the original speaker, then you have a greater degree of confidence in your own understanding. For any viewpoint/message/decision, there should be a clear, concise and verified statement of what was said; without this someone will get it wrong.

#### Rule 2: WRITE BACK for confidence

But do not stop there. If your time and effort depend upon it, you should write it down and send it to everyone involved as a double check. This has several advantages:

Further clarification - is this what you thought we agreed?

Consistency check - the act of writing may highlight defects/omissions

A formal stage - a statement of the accepted position provides a spring board from which to proceed

Evidence - hindsight often blurs previous ignorance and people often fail to recall their previous errors.

#### Rule 3: GIVE BACKGROUND for context

When speaking yourself, you can often counter for possible problems by adding information, and so providing a broader context in which your words can be understood. Thus, there is less scope for alternative interpretations since fewer are consistent. When others are speaking, you should deliberately ask questions yourself to establish the context in which they are thinking. When others are speaking, you should deliberately ask questions yourself to establish the context in which they are thinking.

#### PRACTICAL POINTS

As with all effective communication, you should decide (in advance) on the purpose of the conversation and the plan for achieving it. There is no alternative to this. Some

people are proficient at "thinking on their feet" - but this is generally because they already have clear understanding of the context and their own goals. You have to plan; however, the following are a few techniques to help the conversation along.

#### Assertiveness

The definition of "to assert" is: "to declare; state clearly". This is your aim. If someone argues against you, even loses their temper, you should be quietly assertive. Much has been written to preach this simple fact and commonly the final message is a three-fold plan of action:

- acknowledge what is being said by showing an understanding of the position, or by simply replaying it (a polite way of saying "I heard you already")
- state your own point of view clearly and concisely with perhaps a little supporting evidence
- state what you want to happen next (move it forward).

You will have to make many personal judgment calls when being assertive. There will certainly be times when a bit of quiet force from you will win the day but there will be times when this will get nowhere, particularly with more senior (and unenlightened) management. In the latter case, you must agree to abide by the decision of the senior manager but you should make your objection (and reasons) clearly known. For yourself, always be aware that your subordinates might be right when they disagree with you and if events prove them so, acknowledge that fact gracefully.

#### Confrontations

When you have a difficult encounter, be professional, do not lose your self-control because, simply, it is of no use. Some managers believe that it is useful for "discipline" to keep staff a little nervous. Thus, these managers are slightly volatile and will be willing "to let them have it" when the situation demands. If you do this, you must be consistent and fair so that you staff know where they stand. If you deliberately lose your temper for effect, then that is your decision - however, you must never lose control. Before you say anything, stop, establish what you want as the outcome, plan how to achieve this, and then speak.

Finally, if you are going to criticize or discipline someone, always assume that you have misunderstood the situation and ask questions first which check the facts. This simple courtesy will save you from much embarrassment.

#### **How do you seek information?**

One way to get information is to put questions. There are two ways of phrasing any question: one way (the closed question) is likely to lead to a simple grunt in reply (yes, no, maybe), the second way (the open question) will hand over the speaking role to someone else and force them to say something a little more informative.

Open questions are extremely easy to formulate. You establish in your own mind the topic/aim of the question and then you start the sentence with the words:

WHAT - WHEN - WHICH - WHY - WHERE - HOW

A second way: Let others speak.

Of course, there is more to a conversation (managed or otherwise) than the flow of information. You may also have to win that information by winning the attention and

confidence of the other person. There are many forms of flattery - the most effective is to give people your interest.

Silence is effective - and much under-used. People are nervous of silence and try to fill it. You can use this if you are seeking information. You ask the question, you lean back, the person answers, you nod and smile, you keep quiet, and the person continues with more detail simply to fill your silence.

And the third way is to finish.

At the end of a conversation, you have to give people a clear understanding of the outcome. For instance, if there has been a decision, restate it clearly (just to be sure) in terms of what should happen and by when; if you have been asking questions, summarize the significant (for you) aspects of what you have learnt.

### **How to communicate if you lead a meeting?**

In any organization, "meetings" are a vital part of the organization of work and the flow of information. They act as a mechanism for gathering together resources from many sources and pooling them towards a common objective. They are disliked and mocked because they are usually futile, boring, time-wasting, dull, and inconvenient with nothing for most people to do except doodle while some opinionated has-been extols the virtues of his/her last great (misunderstood) idea. Your challenge is to break this mould and to make your meetings effective. As with every other managed activity, meetings should be planned beforehand, monitored during for effectiveness, and reviewed afterwards for improving their management.

First of all you have to prepare the meeting. A meeting is the ultimate form of managed conversation; as a manager, you can organize the information and structure of the meeting to support the effective communication of the participants. Some of the ideas below may seem a little too precise for an easy going, relaxed, semi-informal team atmosphere - but if you manage to gain a reputation for holding decisive, effective meetings, then people will value this efficiency and to prepare professionally so that their contribution will be heard.

Should you cancel?

As with all conversations, you must first ask: is it worth your time? If the meeting involves the interchange of views and the communication of the current status of related projects, then you should be generous with your time. But you should always consider canceling a meeting which has little tangible value.

Who should attend?

You must be strict. A meeting loses its effectiveness if too many people are involved: so if someone has no useful function, explain this and suggest that they do not come. Notice, they may disagree with your assessment, in which case they should attend (since they may know something you do not); however, most people are only too happy to be released from yet another meeting.

How long?

It may seem difficult to predict the length of a discussion - but you must. Discussions tend to fill the available time which means that if the meeting is open-ended, it will drift on forever. You should stipulate a time for the end of the meeting so that everyone knows, and everyone can plan the rest of their day with confidence.

It is wise to make this expectation known to everyone involved well in advance and to remind them at the beginning of the meeting. There is often a tendency to view meetings as a little relaxation since no one person has to be active throughout. You can redress this view by stressing the time-scale and thus forcing the pace of the discussion: "this is what we have to achieve, this is how long we have to get it done".

If some unexpected point arises during the meeting then realize that since it is unexpected: 1) you might not have the right people present, 2) those there may not have the necessary information, and 3) a little thought might save a lot of discussion. If the new discussion looks likely to be more than a few moments, stop it and deal with the agreed agenda. The new topic should then be dealt with at another "planned" meeting.

### Agenda

The purpose of an agenda is to inform participants of the subject of the meeting in advance, and to structure the discussion at the meeting itself. To inform people beforehand, and to solicit ideas, you should circulate a draft agenda and ask for notice of any other business. Still before the meeting, you should then send the revised agenda with enough time for people to prepare their contributions. If you know in advance that a particular participant needs information or will be providing information, then make this explicitly clear so that there is no confusion.

The agenda states the purpose of each section of the meeting. There will be an outcome from each section. If that outcome is so complex that it can not be summarized in a few points, then it was probably too complex to be assimilated by the participants. The understanding of the meeting should be sufficiently precise that it can be summarized in short form - so display that summary for all other interested parties to see. This form of display will emphasize to all that meetings are about achieving defined goals - this will help you to continue running efficient meetings in the future.

How to conduct a meeting? Whether you actually sit as the Chair or simply lead from the side-lines, as the manager you must provide the necessary support to coordinate the contributions of the participants. The degree of control which you exercise over the meeting will vary throughout; if you get the structure right at the beginning, a meeting can effectively run itself especially if the participants know each other well. In a team, your role may be partially undertaken by others; but if not, you must manage.

The most important thing leading a meeting is to maintain communication

Your most important tools are:

- Clarification - always clarify: the purpose of the meeting, the time allowed, the rules to be observed (if agreed) by everyone.
- Summary - at each stage of the proceedings, you should summarize the current position and progress: this is what we have achieved/agreed, this is where we have reached.
- Focus on stated goals - at each divergence or pause, re-focus the proceedings on the original goals.

In any meeting, it is possible to begin the proceedings by establishing a code of conduct, often by merely stating it and asking for any objections (which will only be accepted if a demonstrably better system is proposed). Thus if the group contains opinionated wind-bags, you might all agree at the onset that all contributions should be limited to two minutes (which focuses the mind admirably). You can then impose this with the full backing of the whole group.

The (stated) purpose of a meeting may suggest to you a specific way of conducting the event, and each section might be conducted differently. For instance, if the purpose is:

- to convey information, the meeting might begin with a formal presentation followed by questions
- to seek information, the meeting would start with a short (clear) statement of the topic/problem and then an open discussion supported by notes on a display, or a formal brainstorming session
- to make a decision, the meeting might review the background and options, establish the criteria to be applied, agree who should make the decision and how, and then do it to ratify/explain decisions, etc

The success of a meeting will often depend upon the confidence with which the individuals will participate. Thus all ideas should be welcome. No one should be laughed at or dismissed ("laughed with" is good, "laughed at" is destructive). This means that even bad ideas should be treated seriously - and at least merit a specific reason for not being pursued further. Not only is this supportive to the speaker, it could also be that a good idea has been misunderstood and would be lost if merely rejected. But basically people should be able to make naive contributions without being made to feel stupid, otherwise you may never hear the best ideas of all.

Avoid direct criticism of any person. For instance, if someone has not come prepared then that fault is obvious to all. If you leave the criticism as being simply that implicit in the peer pressure, then it is diffuse and general; if you explicitly rebuke that person, then it is personal and from you (which may raise unnecessary conflict). You should merely seek an undertaking for the missing preparation to be done: we need to know this before we can proceed, could you circulate it to us by tomorrow lunch?

The rest of this section is devoted to ideas of how you might deal with the various problems associated with the volatile world of meetings. Some are best undertaken by the designated Chair; but if he/she is ineffective, or if no one has been appointed, you should feel free to help any meeting to progress. After all, why should you allow your time to be wasted.

### **Concluding remarks**

The tower of Babel collapsed because people could no longer communicate; their speech became so different that no one could understand another. You need to communicate to coordinate your own work and that of others; without explicit effort your conversation will lack communication and so your work too will collapse through misunderstanding and error. The key is to treat a conversation as you would any other managed activity: by establishing an aim, planning what to do, and checking afterwards that you have achieved that aim. Only in this way can you work effectively with others in building through common effort.

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