

YOU CAN'T SPEAK – THEY CAN'T HEAR: HOW TO BRIDGE COMMUNICATION GAPS

Effective and appropriate interpersonal communication is at the heart of all business success. Those individuals who run small businesses, along with their employees, continually face the challenge of communicating well with each other and with their customers and vendors. When miscommunications occur, it becomes easy to point the finger at someone else. The most productive communications occur when both parties to an exchange take responsibility for their roles in the process. If messages are misinterpreted without asking for clarification, dangerous consequences can occur.

Picture this: You facilitate a weekly meeting with your sales staff. Your role as leader is to not only motivate but create an environment where ideas can be freely exchanged without censure. You've come prepared. In fact, you're so excited about presenting a new business opportunity to your group that you can hardly contain yourself.

You know exactly what you want to say and clearly deliver your message, expecting overwhelming enthusiasm for your ideas, let alone your delivery. As you look out at your group, you see looks of confusion, even fear. You're dumbfounded. What could have gone wrong? When you ask if there are any questions, silence permeates the room. No one is willing to speak up for fear of squelching your enthusiasm. You immediately interpret the less-than-welcoming responses as rejection of your ideas. When we're in the speaking role, whether we're talking to a group or to just one other person, we have a huge responsibility to make sure others understand our messages. Just because we get it doesn't mean others will understand what we're saying. Our job is to give others permission to misinterpret, misunderstand, or disagree without making them feel like morons in the process.

Lest you think the speaker bears the brunt of the responsibility in communication interactions, think again. The listener, too, has a huge responsibility to make sense of what the speaker is saying and what the speaker's intentions are concerning what is being said. Guessing at what the speaker means or worst – making inaccurate assumptions concerning the message – can blow potentially good interactions right out of the water.

Take this example. Ever give someone a compliment only to be met with a defensive attitude on the other end? Here you were trying to be a nice person by telling your co-worker that you're really pleased that he or she met a critical production

deadline when whammo – the cold shoulder! What could possibly have gone wrong? You and I can have all the good intent in the world, but if our conversational partner misreads our intentions, trouble is brewing. In the above scenario, could it be possible that your co-worker heard a different message than the one you delivered? Could your message have been interpreted as one of sarcasm since your style up until now has been to only give compliments that are followed by criticisms? In this case, it's up to the listener to ask for clarification in a non-defensive, non-threatening way. When we ask for clarification we're giving the speaker a chance to "make things right".

My motto is: "Innocent until proven guilty". The real proof is in the clarification and verification process. If you're unwilling to ask for clarification, you choose to remain either ignorant or self righteous, neither of which is particularly flattering. You'll do yourself a favor if you try to remember that messages are basically neutral in nature until they're interpreted. It's at the time of interpretation that real communication begins and solutions to challenges are discovered. If we misinterpret messages only occasionally, we might be inclined to say, "Big deal." Misinterpretation in and of itself is bad enough, but when it leads to inappropriate responses or behaviors that's a bigger issue.

I'll never forget the day in Dallas, Texas when I was driving to the university to do some research. It was a beautiful day and my sport scar was humming on the highway. Out of the blue a red sedan approached me from behind flashing its lights. Immediately I thought to myself, "What a jerk. Pass me if you're in that much of a hurry." The more I perceived the flashing lights as an act of aggression, the more I refused to pull over. When I finally yielded, out of defeat, I noticed a woman in the passenger seat of the sedan holding her stomach and looking as if she were going to deliver a baby at any moment. I guess we know who was really the jerk in this situation.

If you want to avoid these kinds of verbal and nonverbal communication foibles in the future, take these tips to heart:

- Whether you're the speaker or the listener make sure the message and the message's intent are clearly conveyed and understood.
- Always ask yourself if you're hearing only what you want to hear.
- If you're the listener, never be afraid to ask for clarification.
- As a speaker, create a non-judgmental environment where others are given permission to ask questions.
- NEVER make an assumption that everyone interprets messages in the same way or that they should, for that matter.
- Give others the benefit of the doubt, regardless of your role in conversations.
- Don't wait for tension to build before addressing issues of importance.

In order for businesses to thrive, owners and employees alike must take responsibility for effective communications. No one is exempt. If we find ourselves looking more at others as the source of miscommunications and less at ourselves, our businesses run the risk of becoming miniscule.

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