



Communication tangles: mistakes to avoid

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We are in learning and development. We have exceptional communication skills, don't we? No matter how experienced or well intentioned we are, we sometimes communicate in ways that get us further from our desired outcome than we would like. Here are some pitfalls to watch out for.

1 Communicating by the least appropriate method for the situation

Have you ever clicked on "send" and then seconds later wished you hadn't? Have you sent a seemingly straightforward text only to receive an unexpectedly abrupt or terse reply?

We all know that the written word lacks tone and can often be interpreted the wrong way. Email and text messages are great for conveying information but don't use them if there needs to be emotional understanding as they lack all the nuances of conversation and are too easy to misconstrue.

Tips

- Email is great if it is to disseminate information and to keep records.
- Avoid humour in email and text messages with people you don't know

very well as it may be misinterpreted. Smiley face or not!

- Phone calls and face-to-face meetings are better to have when the issue is more complex. You can hear tone, humour and get an immediate reaction and response.

2 Being reactive

"What do you mean by that?!"

When you react to someone it's often not just about the person or the situation. Their comments may hit a nerve or you may just be having a tough day.

When this happens, it doesn't serve any beneficial purpose to respond on the spot. I suggest holding back and addressing it later, if it's still relevant. You can then remove any unhelpful emotion you may have around it.

Tips

- If feeling reactive, let people know that you will address something later and then walk away from the situation to re-group.
- If you do react, give people some context as to what is going on with you. Don't share details or drama but just how you are feeling. People are generally more understanding when they have some knowledge of where something is coming from.
- Never write anything negative in an email or text. Period. Once it is sent you can't take it back.
- If you must vent or are feeling emotional when writing an email save it to drafts and re-read later. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and think about how you'd feel if you received it.

3 Using negative language

I was running a training session last week and an IT person walked into the room and his first utterance was, "You can't have the cable like that!" He was right but that's not the point. It got me offside straight away. Negative language can belittle the receiver. In neuroscience terms we say that your status is affected and when this happens you become annoyed, uncomfortable or stressed. Your confidence can also be rocked, which affects performance.

Tips

- Avoid negative language in your feedback such as "You haven't done it



correctly” or “You didn’t give me what I needed.” Replace with statements such as, “Can I make a suggestion on how you could make it even better?” and “Thanks for the report. The introduction is really succinct and flows well. If you could add more detail in the results section, that would be great.”

- Lose the dreaded “why” questions if you really don’t want to know why. Do you really want to know why someone was late or do you just want to reprimand them for it? Are you asking “why” to gain understanding or to get some ammunition to refute whatever they say during the course of the training session?

4 Believing your way is the only way

There is the old saying, “If you want something done right, then do it yourself”. It may be why so much of the Australian workforce is overworked and stressed.

Of course people are never going to do things exactly as you would. However, we need to get over not letting others take on tasks or getting annoyed with them because they don’t do it as well as we can. In many cases it simply doesn’t matter.

What you can do is support them to do a good job, as a perfect job is not possible. So let go of the 100 per cent. Most times, if the work is done to 90 per cent then it will suffice, and it is a much more effective use of an individual’s and company’s time and resources.

Tips

- Be specific about what you want from people. If you asked three people to measure the impact of the training for example, chances are you’d get three different responses done in different ways. If you want it done as a certain type of report with bullet points then tell them, or give them an example or template to use.
- After giving someone directions or instructions, check understanding with questions such as “So, how are you going to do it?” or “How do you see it looking?”
- Give appropriate guidelines or structure and a concrete example to work with so they can replicate, then ask them questions so they can check their own understanding.
- Be open to other points of view,

especially in terms of execution. You may get something from them or you can collaborate to an even better solution.

5 Avoiding difficult conversations

It is estimated that up to 90 per cent of difficult conversations are avoided in the workplace. However, they serve a purpose. If they do not occur then often the issue lies unresolved, festering like a sore until the pain becomes too great and you explode. You could scream louder than you meant to, the message may get garbled or it may get personal.

Or you just end up resenting the person and you don’t let it go. Every thing about them ends up annoying you.

Tips

- Address something early if it’s important and you’d like to promote a change of behaviour.
- Prepare for the conversation and stick to the facts. Don’t make it personal.
- If someone does react to the information, be okay with it knowing that people will respond in different ways.
- Always give people right of reply and don’t take it personally.

6 Silence

Silence isn’t always golden. It often places people in limbo.

A study was done on two companies that were downsizing. One called a meeting to tell staff what was going on—namely that there would be retrenchments and, that although the numbers of people affected was unclear, decisions would be made with everyone being informed in a week’s time. In the other company the staff were told nothing but sensed something was up.

Which worked best? Not surprisingly, it was those who were updated and knew what was going on, despite it potentially being bad news. The others were more uneasy, annoyed and unsettled. Consequently it had a greater effect on morale and productivity.

Tips

- Give people verbal or written updates. Certainty makes them feel more secure. (Even if it may be bad news.) eg “I can’t give you an answer right now but will

let you know next week when I have more information.”

- Continually let people know what is required of them in a training session. Don’t presume they should know.

7 Not enough acknowledgement

How often do we point out the things that need improving?

Positive acknowledgment promotes a respectful and encouraging workplace.

Tips

- “Well done, good job” does not give the person enough information to build on. What exactly are they doing well?
- Make acknowledgement specific: “Well done. You really supported the team by developing simple and transferable learning activities for the training”.

8 Giving too much irrelevant information

Don’t get me wrong. I like my accountant and think he does a great job. However, when I ask him a question, he tends to give me way too much information. He shares scenario A, B, C, D and E. It just confuses me. A better way would be to find out more about what I need so he can then choose to only share scenarios B and D, for example. Then check to see I have what I need.

Tips

- Find out what people want. Ask them upfront in the training room. “What do you want to get out of the session?”. Tick it off at the conclusion of the session. Don’t be afraid of the response being something you weren’t going to cover. Incorporate it in some way if you can or share, at a later stage, where they can access this information.
- Check understanding along the way. Ask people what would help them to understand the topic a little better. ■

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