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Focus

A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group

Preventing Communication Misfires

“We need to communicate better!” is a common business complaint, and poor communication is the most common *easily correctable* problem in business. For instance, did you know:

- As little as 7% of how the listener interprets your message depends on the words you use, or
- The average person forgets half the content immediately after a 10-minute presentation, or
- 60% of all management problems are related to listening?

Poor communications causes losses in time, customers, and employees. Unlike many problems, however, improving communications is totally within a company's control.

The following four simple steps help avoid communication misfires.

1. Know your audience
2. Choose the right method
3. Know what you want
4. Listen first

Although listed last, listening is the most important key to effective communication.

Know your audience

The first rule of communication is to know your audience so you can first engage this audience, whether one or many, and then tailor your communication approach. Answering the following four questions will help you prepare for your audience.

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- What are their needs and expectations? Does the audience want help, information, or an enthusiastic pep talk? Also, consider their expectations of you. What do they think you *can* deliver, and what is their expectation you *will* deliver?
- What is the audience's frame of reference? For example, are they accustomed to tight control or freedom? Do they think in terms of scarcity or abundance?
- Define the predominant experience and education of the audience. Include people's culture in this consideration because different upbringings result in different expectations.
- Has the audience recently heard bad news? Any good news? Will people be worried about the economy, competitive threats, or uncertainty about their future?

Choose the right method

We communicate using three communication channels: visual cues, sounds, and words. We use all of these channels in face-to-face interactions, just sounds and words when talking by telephone, and words alone when using writing, email, or other text-based communication. People place far more importance on visual and tonal cues than words when decoding a spoken message. Left with words alone, we're more skeptical about the message. Therefore, the more communication channels you use, the greater your ability to clearly communicate.

Visual cues are overwhelmingly dominant when decoding face-to-face interactions. A smile is the most important visual cue if you want the audience to believe you.

Using an inappropriate communication method is a major cause of communication misfires. For example, the lack of tonal and visual cues makes email messages easy to misinterpret; words alone can appear unintentionally harsh. A telephone conversation conveys much more information than email because the tone, tempo, and volume of the speaker's voice helps the listener decode the emotional content of the message. Because full bandwidth is needed for important messages, use face-to-face communication for subjects like:

- Bad news,
- A complicated situation,
- When selling or negotiating, and
- For maximum impact in "good news" situations.

Know what you want

Make certain you know exactly the desired outcome of the message – the best case scenario. For example, your goal might be to obtain information, to gain support, make a sale, receive approval, or influence someone to vote for you. If you're making a specific request, be clear and precise in communicating your desires.

Listen first

Showing you're willing to listen *first* makes others more willing to listen to you. In addition to gathering information, listening first makes your ideas, opinions or suggestions relevant to the person with whom you are speaking. Listening first *earns you the right to comment*

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Careful listening is especially important when trying to understand a new or unexpected event, dealing with an angry or upset person, or carrying out a meaningful conversation with a customer. Patiently listening *without interruption* to the sequence of a story helps the speaker relax and organize his or her thoughts. It also helps clarify context and frame key issues, thereby saving time in the long run.

Finally, when in doubt, probe for clarification. Don't assume you know what the other person means. Also, if you feel any important issues remain unresolved, keep the conversation moving forward. Not just going, but moving forward. Patience and careful listening are usually rewarded with a clear picture of the situation.

Tom Wagner

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