

10 QUESTIONS TO STELLAR COMMUNICATION

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Communication makes the “top three” in many lists today. The most important ingredient in happy marriages. The most essential element in raising well-adjusted teens. The most vital skill in job-interviewing success. The greatest problem voiced by political parties in gaining support for their candidate. The most frequent reason top talent joins a new team. The most critical component of great customer service. The biggest challenge leaders experience in times of change and upheaval.

It’s all about communication. And success in business is all about how well you communicate—to your coworkers and customers.

Managers Inform; Leaders Connect

According to the late Peter Drucker, writing in the *Harvard Business Review* and summarizing his 65-year consulting career with CEOs, one of the eight key tenets

of effective executives is taking responsibility for communication. Leaders lead; they take responsibility for the communication culture. Managers maintain; they go with the status quo.

Leaders become the face or human connection of an organization. They “connect” with other people—coworkers, clients, partners, each other—to get things done. Specifically, they communicate values. They act consistently with those values. They communicate respect and concern. They tell the truth.

What’s the payoff personally in learning to be an exceptional communicator? You’ll be able to

- Identify what to communicate, when to communicate it, and how to say it so that it sticks.
- Create compelling conversations to influence others to act.
- Connect with people to increase trust and cooperation.

Effective leaders take responsibility for the communication culture.

- Facilitate understanding in complex, controversial, and difficult situations.
- Encourage information sharing rather than information hoarding.
- Build morale, improve team chemistry, and make others feel part of the group.
- Increase your credibility and impact when speaking before a group.
- Make others' work meaningful to them.
- Be able to coach others to improve their performance.

But hold on a moment before starting to sing “Kumbaya.” You’re not going to accomplish this miracle overnight—without answering the next question.

What do people—your boss, your cube mate, your kids—mean by the comment, “There’s just no communication around here!” What makes people utter this complaint so frequently?

Why do people keep sending data, graphs, slides, and e-mail, thinking they’re communicating? Why do parents keep talking “till they’re blue in the face” and never get their kids to tune in? The answer to these questions may just be right under your own nose . . . literally.

Symptoms of Poor Personal Communication

Have you ever heard anyone say, “I’m a lousy communicator”? Hardly ever, I’ll wager. The overwhelming majority of all résumés say “excellent oral and written

communication skills.” Most of us think we’re great communicators. Unfortunately, our own understanding or response is not the best measure of effectiveness. Everything we say is clear to us—or we wouldn’t have said it that way. So when we look *outward* for clues of poor communication, these symptoms often surface:

- Feeling that everyone agrees with and supports what you say, feel, and do most of the time
- Lack of input, questions, or feedback on your ideas presented in meetings
- Few or no ideas contributed in your meetings
- Inability to influence others to accept your ideas or change their viewpoint or behavior
- Seeing little or no behavioral change in people you’ve coached for improved performance
- Confusion about what you’re supposed to be doing
- No understanding of the “why” behind assigned projects and goals
- Thinking that what you do or say doesn’t really “change things” in the long run
- Nervousness or hesitancy about presenting new ideas to your boss, client, or strategic partners
- Ongoing conflict with peers or family
- Frequent rework
- Constant reminders from you to others to take action, meet deadlines, or send information
- Frequent requests for more information about topics or issues that you think you’ve already addressed sufficiently
- Feeling of disconnection and discomfort in one-to-one and small-group interactions
- Lack of positive feedback about your presentations or documents (from those not obligated to give it)

So for a more objective snapshot of your own skills when you’re trying to keep from drowning in today’s

information deluge, ask yourself these ten questions about how well you communicate:

Is Your Communication Correct?

Lying at work, often gently referred to as *spin*, drains us and enrages us. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth . . . should not be three different things. And yet, spin drives our businesses and our lives. The challenge becomes to maintain truth and avoid lies without getting dizzy.

How do you regain trust in an environment where truth is hard to come by?

Nothing makes people believe you when you're right like admitting when you're wrong. Nothing earns more respect than confidently owning up to your own blunders, decisions, or poor performance—without denial or excuses. Ask a few has-been politicians, rock stars, or pro athletes how far denials took them in their pursuit of forgiveness after a major mess-up. Typically, the cover-up created more nasty noise and clutter in the media than the original offense. Likewise, in the workplace, there's tremendous power in being known as a person who tells the truth. Straight. Unvarnished. Direct.

Is Your Communication Complete?

Leaders often get so busy analyzing, problem solving, questioning, coordinating, deciding, and delegating

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when you're right, admit it
when you're wrong.*

that they fail to communicate what's going on behind the scenes. Then they're puzzled when those who haven't been involved in the process don't readily buy in when they announce decisions and plans. You may recognize some of these attitudes, which all cause leaders to skimp on the details and leave others lagging behind.

Leave-the-Thinking-to-Us Mentality

Some leaders have a paternalistic culture. They view run-of-the-mill employees as the children of the organization, not to be trusted with the real facts, information, and explanations about decisions or actions.

Too Busy to Make Things Easier

Some people claim they're too busy to communicate. Consequently, they waste time in cleaning up the mess of miscommunication—settling conflicts, clarifying misunderstood missions, rewriting unclear documents, rehashing the same old issues in unproductive meetings, and shuffling misplaced priorities and missed deadlines caused by unclear directions.

Fear of Giving Bad News and Handling Negative Reactions

Let's face it: nobody likes to be the bearer of bad news. Fear leads to delay in telling bad news—even when the consequences threaten to engulf people. Positive people keep thinking, "If I put news of this impending problem off long enough, maybe I can solve things on my own—or at least mitigate the damage before I report it." The less complete information they share "in the interim," they think, the more opportunity to save the sinking ship. The only problem with that philosophy, of course, is that if their efforts prove unsuccessful, their full disclosure and warning come far too late; the damage is catastrophic.

So what's the antidote to the confusion and distrust caused by incomplete information? Consider the following new attitudes and actions:

- *Explain the reasoning behind your decisions.* You can't expect buy-in if people haven't traveled the same information road you've been driving.

What's the antidote to the confusion and distrust caused by incomplete information?

- *Focus on the how, not just the what.* Unless you're running for the Oval Office, tell people how you plan to implement things.
- *Be relevant rather than resented.* Interpret and translate the relevant details to the different people or groups involved.
- *Don't hide behind the technology.* What takes 10 e-mail messages to negotiate or clarify can often be communicated in a three-minute phone conversation. Pick up the phone—or walk down the hall to the next cubicle occasionally.
- *Communicate like you brush your teeth.* Make it a habit. Do it frequently, habitually, systematically. Get a system, a channel, a structure, a timetable that works for you. Informal chats in the hallway. Fireside chats in the lobby. Factory visits by the big cheese. Morning meetings between shifts.

Is Your Communication Clear?

We all assume we're clear when we write or speak. But just to make sure, we have a habit of tacking on the meaningless, "Any questions?" And when there are none, the tendency is to walk away from the conversation, assuming everyone got the message. Often, just the opposite is true. No questions may mean several things: People didn't understand enough of what you said to ask questions. They didn't understand the relevancy of your information to their job or plans. They

didn't understand they were supposed to take action based on your message.

Unexpected responses, blank stares, lack of coordination, and frequent rework are other signs that you may not be getting through.

So what to do?

- *Start with the punch line.* Whether delivering a presentation, writing e-mail, or briefing somebody in the hallway, make the opening line your punch line.
- *Be specific.* Never hide behind the old argument, "Oh, we're just arguing about semantics here." Words mean something. And therein lies the problem. Selection is central to understanding and agreement.
- *Make sure your nonverbal cues don't contradict your words.* Tell nonperformers that their behavior is unacceptable, but smile and nod encouragement at the wrong time during your discussion, and they may walk out thinking "no big deal" and revert to the status quo.
- *Adapt your style to the person and purpose.* Some people primarily take in information visually. Others pay attention to what they hear and rarely notice what they see. Still others learn and draw conclusions kinesthetically—primarily through what they experience through their own senses.

Is Your Communication Purposefully Unclear?

Indirect communication makes social camaraderie possible. If someone asks, "What do you think of my new office?" you don't typically respond, "It looks cheap. And if I had to look at this color of wall paint all day, I'd puke." Tact is the order of the day, and it makes life easier. But when it comes to discussions about problems and performance, direct discussion produces honest evaluation of issues and improves bad situations.

If you're the speaker, eliminate euphemisms that preclude meaning or action. Put yourself on the listening

end of the message you just delivered: What comes to mind? If you draw a blank about your next action, not good. No matter the difficulty of your message, say it. If you want action, state it.

Is Your Communication Consistent?

Do your actions, policies, priorities, and practices match your words?

You communicate by what you reward and what you choose not to reward. You communicate by what you fund and what you don't fund. You communicate by what training you offer and what training you decide not to offer. You communicate by which policies you enforce and which you fail to enforce. You communicate by how many approval signatures you require on funding requests and the authorization limits on those approvals.

Credible communicators follow through with what they promise—or stop promising.

Are You as a Person Credible?

Generally, five things either contribute to or detract from people's inclination to believe you:

- *The Look:* Your appearance and physical presence, in dress, grooming, and body language.
- *The Language:* The words you choose and how well you think on your feet to express yourself.
- *The Likeability Factor:* Your personality and the chemistry you create between yourself and others: authenticity, vulnerability, approachability, a sense of humor, respect, courtesy—these are the traits that typically attract others and open their hearts and minds.
- *Character:* Your values and integrity.
- *Competence:* Your skill and track record of results.

If your message isn't sinking in . . . if you're not getting the action you want . . . maybe you should take it, well . . . personally.

Are You Concerned and Connected?

Leaders who show they care about people as individuals—not as employees, suppliers, or customers—make a connection. They engage—rather than just report the news. They consider the impact of the message they're delivering and are emotionally present. Likewise, they phrase sensitive news carefully rather than just blurt it out in meetings.

A big part of connection is listening as if you care. The following are *not* empathetic comments—no matter how many times you've heard them around the water cooler:

- “It could be worse.”
- “Looks like you'll just have to tough it out.”
- “You think *you've* got it bad—you should hear what we went through last year.”
- “This may be a blessing in disguise.”

Listening means focusing on the other person with sincere, not just polite, interest—and not just waiting your turn to talk.

Finally, connection involves acknowledging mistakes, shortcomings, and blame when necessary, and apologizing sincerely. It's a cold heart that cannot accept a sincere apology offered in true humility.

These are the ingredients of an apology that connects with people:

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- Admission of error, guilt, or wrongdoing. The person accepts responsibility for what was said or done and its inappropriateness, inaccuracy, weakness, hurtfulness, insensitivity, or whatever.
- Specificity. Apologizing specifically sounds sincere. Global, blanket apologies convey lack of concern or understanding of the situation or damage caused.
- Amends. Apologizing typically involves some attempt to make things right, some words or gesture of goodwill toward the offended person or group.

Is Your Communication Current?

Speed is the new measure of quality communication. If people typically receive your information only “the morning after”—the morning *after* they were supposed to have attended a meeting, the week *after* they were supposed to have submitted a report, the day *after* they were supposed to have been on a teleconference—consider why. Are you overwhelmed with the job and can’t keep up with the workload? Are you not delegating tasks appropriately? Do you have an attitude of unresponsiveness? Do you fear giving negative news for fear of reaction?

Your answers to the previous questions are less relevant than the impression left with others waiting for responses. Those will be the questions forming in other people’s minds when your information and responses always arrive “after the fact” or after they have already received “the news” from other sources.

So when faced with a time crunch, make it a habit to get information out today even in less-than-perfect form rather than wait until tomorrow for polished prose. Send information at the point of relevance—or not at all. In short, prefer substance over shine.

Does Your Communication Make You Look Competent?

People can’t always follow you around to watch you fire

a rocket, manage a research team, handle stubborn suppliers, or correct product-design flaws. But they do hear what you *say* or see what you *write* about that work. And they often judge your competence by what you communicate about your job—not necessarily by what they see firsthand.

Make Your Facts Tell a Story

The only thing worse than filling up your speech, slides, e-mail, or reports with fact after fact after fact . . . is not shaping them to tell your story. What story do your facts tell? What trail do the facts leave?

Use a Natural Delivery Style

My first challenge in coaching executives on their presentation skills is to bring their split personalities together—to help them learn to be their natural rather than unnatural self when speaking to a group. But remember that natural is not laid-back, winging it, unprepared, low energy, and monotone. Be your best, most natural self.

Make Your Bottom Line Your Opening Line

Forget the oral book report. Never fall prey to thinking, “I need to give them a little background first.” Wrong approach. They’ll never understand your background until they know your point. Instead, start with a summary of your key message. Then support your point with reasons, data, statistics, or whatever is necessary to tell your story and make the listeners or readers come around to your way of thinking and take action.

Be Passionate

Take your personality with you when you present your ideas to a group or enter the conference room for a meeting. Sometimes people insist that they’re afraid to be *too* anything—too over the top, too strong, too overstated, too sold on the idea, too much the cheerleader. So in their quest not to be *too* anything, they lag in the land of *not very*—not very clear, not very sold on, not very eager, not very aggressive, not very enthusiastic, not very convinced, not very sure, not very prepared.

How passionate would you want your lawyer to be if pleading the facts of your insurance case to the jury? How passionate would you want your congressional representative to be when arguing for research funding for your medical condition? How passionate would you be in persuading investors to fund your new entrepreneurial venture? How passionate would you be about pleading with a kidnapper to release your child?

Passion rises and falls based on what's at stake. Your audience understands that concept all too well. They take their cues from you. Your interest interests them. The difference between *too* and *not very* can mean the difference between the life or death of your ideas and proposals.

Is Your Communication Circular?

Circular communication goes in all directions—or at least it should. That is, information and ideas should flow up the chain of command. Down the chain of command. Across departmental lines. From the day shift to the night shift. For the most part, such communication doesn't happen. At least, not routinely. How can you be a part of repairing this kink in the communication chain?

Cultivate Compelling Conversations

Think how often you replay conversations in your head—what you've said or plan to say to someone. Consider conversations a learning tool. They teach you both intellectual and emotional truth. That said, be the instigator of inspiring, intriguing conversations.

Know When to See the Whites of Their Eyes

As you encourage information exchange at all levels, you'll need to make a critical decision often. What's the best way to pass on this specific information? E-mail? Phone? Or a face-to-face conversation? A formal letter or report? The method you choose can make a tremendous difference in the results or action generated.

Learn to Connect All Along the Food Chain

In a culture that encourages conversations at all levels, you may find yourself talking with everyone from the CEO to the chauffeur. Be ready to connect at *their* point of interest.

Put “improved communication” in one of the top three slots on your own personal development plan this year. Stellar communication is the signature of star performers.



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