

Interpersonal communication frequently fails because of the imperfections in the process. Too often communication fails simply because we assume the person we are talking with knows and understands what we happen to be talking about—after all, *we* know what we are talking about. Also, the process is fully as susceptible to failure when viewed from the other side; we assume we know what the other person means without taking steps to make certain this is so. The greatest number of communication failures probably occurs in simple interchanges between people: You say something to another person and the two of you part, each with a meaning in mind. You believe you have been understood, and the other person believes he or she understands; yet you have parted with completely different meanings in mind.

DEVELOPING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Every supervisor should strive to develop a personal approach to establishing and maintaining honest two-way communication in all person-to-person contacts. A sound approach does not involve slogans, catchphrases, or other special language or unique terminology that has to be learned. It involves only common-sense rules and suggestions. There are no formulaic approaches; rather, our interest most appropriately resides in the simple fundamentals of good interpersonal communication that, when fully absorbed through faithful practice, essentially become automatic.

Communication Perspective

When we feel inclined complain about the lack of real communication in the organization, we are surely not speaking of ourselves. Rather, we are talking about all other people who we believe should be keeping us advised of what we want to know. When we say this or something similar we feel "loopless"—we have been cut out of the loop and feel like we have been denied information. It usually does not occur to us that we ourselves are a significant part of the problem. As noted in the foregoing sections, individually we all tend to think we are better communicators than we really are. This statement applies to everyone, especially those who enter communication believing they are very good at it.

When we assume a communications expertise we do not possess we behave in a manner that prevents us from communicating as effectively as we are otherwise capable of doing. It is necessary to remain constantly aware of this "expertise assumption" and its effects; this awareness will encourage us to reach out in communication rather than waiting for everything to flow toward us. To improve communication within the organization and increase the effectiveness of every interpersonal contact, do not presume to tell others what to do. Rather, work on yourself, recognizing that you can always improve your own communications skills and you can always take steps to make whatever interchange you are involved in more productive. It is not readily possible for you to change others' behavior, but you can always do something about your own behavior—and how you behave with others largely determines your own results.

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Controlling Your Communication Channels

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A Genuine Two-Way Street

Problems can occur when there is no interchange between participants in the transmission of a message, that is, if *feedback* is not part of the normal communication process. Without verification or acknowledgement there is never assurance that the message sent and the message received are the

Employees always need to have their concerns addressed and their questions acknowledged, even when management has nothing substantive to give them. Too many supervisors tend to remain silent when they have no substantive information to impart, but silence is upsetting and potentially harmful. Employees need to be talked with even if all the supervisor can say is that nothing is yet known for sure.

When we communicate we are trying to either move a specific thought accurately from one mind to another or trying to work out something so that both parties understand it the same way.

Comparing and contrasting one-way versus two-way communication relative to some key characteristics:

- Concerning *speed of communication*, it is always quicker to dispense information in one-way fashion and move on than it is to invite or supply feedback and develop mutual assurance. Under the pressure of time we are encouraged to communicate one way when we should be consciously communicating two way.
- “Noise” in communication, interference or generally unwanted transmission, is always present in two-way communication. We must accept its presence and learn how to control it. It exists in the form of external distractions and as extraneous, confusing, and conflicting information that flows when multiple parties are involved in communication.

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- *Correctness* of communication, or *accuracy* of the judgments rendered, is always greater in two-way communication. In so-called one-way communication there is no verification of information. Two-way communication, however, is predicated on achieving interchange that reduces or eliminates the likelihood of error.

• In true two-way communication the *sender's position* is one of vulnerability. Because the sender of a message can be questioned or challenged in a two-way situation, some senders tend to adopt a one-way posture that effectively blocks out feedback. Further problems of the sender's position are the difficulties created by poor management and inept leadership. Managers who are driven largely by ego, arrogance, impatience, or aggressiveness are more inclined to communicate one-way, acting on the implicit assumption that because *they* understand what they are saying then everyone should understand them. Certain leadership styles encourage feedback; certain styles block feedback.

Of the foregoing the two conditions having the strongest effects in pushing people inappropriately toward being one-way communicators are *speed* and the *sender's position*—sender's position because of various complex reasons only hinted at previously and speed because we are almost always operating under the pressure of time. At various times most of us are guilty of allowing a perceived lack of time to force us toward being one-way communicators when we should in reality be consciously two-way. *Time is the strongest force in causing us to short-cut communications.*

A strong determinant of whatever mode of communication may be chosen in a specific situation is the *immediacy of feedback* desired. Voice mail, e-mail, letter, or memo, all suggest differing opportunities for feedback, as does the *face-to-face contact*, the original mode, and in many respects still the best means in terms of (1) transmitting the whole message (body language, vocal tone, and all) and (2) providing the opportunity for immediate feedback.

Two-way communication is not about converting others to your way of thinking or attempting to convince, compel, or control others (although much of it is used that way). Two-way communication is also not about justifying prior opinions or supporting premade decisions. Also, communication is not a game or contest to be won or lost, as it frequently is for people who take a "loss" (in an argument, for example) as a personal defeat.

What True Two-Way Communication Requires

Trust and respect must be inherent in the process, and all participants must either want the same thing from the process (such as a mutually acceptable solution) or must generally have a common purpose in communicating. Parties must be willing to give as well as take and must be willing to allow their ideas to be challenged and must be willing to change if necessary. There should be nothing to fear from this process; a sound idea will only be strengthened by challenge (and if an idea can be thrown into doubt by challenge, perhaps it should be examined further).

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