

Marketing Instincts

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Hugh Latif & Associates Management Consultants

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Effective communication for successful executives!

Effective communication is the back bone of successful leaders and the most powerful ingredient for managing your troops with excellence. Whether you are a CEO, a General Manager, a Sales Manager, a Minister, a Headmaster, an army General, a Soccer coach or a Homemaker your success as a leader will be largely influenced by your ability to communicate effectively.

Almost any function, position or role requires some kind of leadership and leadership depends on effective communication! (Consider the head of the family and how he/she can influence the behaviour of the entire family or the coach's influence on the sports team) Whether you want to make convincing presentations with confidence, negotiate with ease or resolve conflicts quickly, effective communication is decisive.

The ability to "get your message across" effectively and clearly is vital. How you set goals and objectives; communicate with your staff, train and develop, instruct, encourage, correct, lead, present, coach, reward and so on are all crucial components of communication.

Is communication an art, a science or a combination of both? Are we born with the gift of good communication or do we acquire this ability through experience and study? While opinions may vary, I believe the answer is really a combination of both; meaning that some people are naturally gifted to communicate with ease while others have to work harder to communicate.

But let's simplify this by rating communication skills on a scale of 1 to 10 (with ten being the highest). I hope that following and implementing the practical suggestions contained within this article would move your score upward 1 to 3 points on the communication scale. No matter where your starting point is, you can improve your score by reflecting on these suggestions and then putting them in action. So, here goes...

PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Communicating clearly

Motivating people, gaining the trust of your team or customers, managing change, negotiating successfully etc. requires clear communication. Clear communication means that people understand what you are saying and what your expectations are from them. If you often hear people say to you: "I am sorry I misunderstood" or "oh... is this what you meant?" you may want to review your communication style. Here are three easy steps to clearer communication:

- 1) Prepare ahead of time, by thinking beforehand what it is that you want to communicate; be it at a meeting, by telephone, through an email, or whatever it is. In other words, think first and then organize your message.

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- 2) Take the time to clearly explain the message you are communicating. Do you need examples, photos, documents etc. to reinforce your message? Secondly, ask the person(s) for a confirmation of what they understood. Be diplomatic about it but a timely quick confirmation is a sign of caring; it also underlines that communication is a two way process.
- 3) Follow-up in due time to make sure that the message has been received correctly.

Achieving clarity starts by being “clear in your own mind” about what you want to communicate and then by being brief, concise and to the point, leaving no room for guessing.

Executives and Senior Managers have three key responsibilities in leading their teams:

- 1) Delivering results
- 2) Strengthening the strategic position of their company, division, department or team
- 3) Developing their people skills and building a strong team

Effective communication is the most important ingredient to achieve these three key responsibilities. If you are not an effective delegator, it is a matter of time before you “hit a brick wall” because you cannot do everything by yourself. Poor delegators and team leaders are often workaholics; many of them end up on hospital beds. It does not matter how strategically minded you are or how smart you are, you need to get your troops to execute your strategy with excellence and you need to communicate with effectiveness.

Part of communicating clearly also includes using the appropriate vehicle for communication. For example, face to face communication, meetings, telephone, email, in writing, verbally, town hall meetings, formal and informal events, breakfast, lunches and dinners etc. You should use all these different tools at your disposal to enhance your communication.

Learning to listen is also part of being an effective communicator; God has given us two ears and one mouth!

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION:

If you are the CEO or President of your company, it is good to use events to update your troops on company achievements, performance and to communicate future goals. A summer BBQ and a year-end or Christmas party/dinner are excellent occasions to update, thank and encourage the staff.

A one page letter to all employees – once a quarter - helps them stay up to date on the company’s performance and encourage them towards future achievements. Posting the letter on the bulletin board is OK but it is much more effective to attach the letter to the pay statement or cheque. This will ensure that every employee receives the letter and is informed.

Meeting new employees once in their first 30 to 60 days of employment for a quick breakfast is exceptionally informative to you and to them. You will learn more about your recruiting and selection procedures, company training systems, front line managers’ behaviour, productivity and quality measures and you will get suggestions free of charge. Most importantly you will learn first-hand about the calibre of people that are joining your team!

Performance Reviews, Employee Awards, Employee Suggestion Program and Sales Lead Programs are also excellent tools to promote internal communication. They will aid your staff to behave and work with team spirit and to be dedicated to customer satisfaction. These tools work miracles to make the Sales department and the

Operations/Production department work effectively together. Well done and managed Performance Reviews help managers and staff work better together without the “us” and “them” mentality that creates strong invisible walls that inhibit creativity and performance.

Frequent celebrations for exceptional performance, significant achievements by the staff, and accomplishments of key milestones build staff confidence and keep things into perspective within a competitive market place and increasing customer expectations. A suggestion program also helps employees think about how to improve the business. The people that are on the front line with customers or with the actual work you do, be it on the assembly line, in the warehouse, in the delivery truck or behind the computer, are your best source of suggestions. You must encourage your employees to think and contribute. You must also reward them for their input and the reward does not always have to be monetary; there are many ways to reward your people.

Finally, on the internal communication, it is vital that you meet once a month with your senior team to review the results vs. plan, and to evaluate what decision(s) need to be taken and what action(s) need to be done to: accelerate or sustain your performance if you are on track, or to turn-around your performance if you are behind. Separate meetings with team members are good to address specific issues, but there is no substitute to this once a month meeting with all senior team members to know how the entire team is doing “corporately”.

Don't forget also that developing your people and building a strong team are key responsibilities of a good leader, hence the need to use these team meetings to also develop the leadership skills of team members including public speaking, taking accountability, decision making, planning, communicating, problem solving, meeting deadlines, setting objectives, handling human resources issues, resolving conflicts etc.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

On the external side, you want to make sure that your external communication to and with the market place with customers, prospects, suppliers, bankers, media, governments, competitors etc. is also effective. Your company's goodwill is not solely based on sales and profits; but will include your company's reputation in the market place. What customers and suppliers think of you and what is the message you convey to the external world.

Everything that is used externally is communicating “something” to the market place; this includes your business cards, your brochures, your letters, your invoices, your envelopes, your product packaging, even your cheques and all the way up to your packing slip - **every piece of paper coming from you is sending a message.**

Your reception area, office, plant, warehouse, signage, parking lot etc. - every inch of your business is communicating a message. Whether your premises are clean, orderly, safe and attractive is all part of your communication to the external world.

You must have heard the old saying that “you never get a second chance to make a **first impression**”; this means that being greeted by a friendly and professional receptionist makes a difference. Waiting in a clean and comfortable reception area makes a difference.

You can use the few moments that visitors spend in your reception area to communicate subliminally by displaying some awards the company has won, exhibiting attractive photos of your product(s) or special staff members, community support initiatives you have contributed to, certificates of membership to associations etc. All these will help communicate that your business is well established, proud of its contribution, helpful in the local community or in other terms a successful enterprise.

A clean visitor's washroom will also be remembered by people who traveled long to get to your office. I can also suggest that a small bouquet of fresh flowers on the receptionist's desk will add a nice finishing touch.

In most companies, communication with the external world happens largely through telephone and email. Here as well, it is an excellent investment to provide specific training to your employees about professional telephone manners including the use of voice mail and recorded messages, how to transfer calls, how to leave effective voice mails etc. In this manner, not only do you train your people to be more effective and productive but you impress your customers and business associates with the high calibre of professionals you employ throughout the ranks of your company.

The same suggestion applies to proper use of the email system which can be a great productivity booster or a great productivity thief for your organization. It never ceases to amaze me how companies invest vast amount of money to purchase and install the latest technological gears and software but then do not invest in the training of how to best use this technology. Investing in training is a most profitable proposition because it helps your staff be efficient in what they do.

Since a lot of what we do is through the phone and the email system, using these tools in an efficient manner does not only help the bottom line but also helps build an excellent reputation for your business. In today's competitive and global market place, every aspect of your business can be used as a competitive edge. **You can choose to be one of the many doing the same thing or be a leader in your field through excellence in everything you do.**

Finally make sure that your marketing machine is also communicating the right message to the market place. This includes a professional and attractive website, an attractive trade show stand, professionally executed corporate events, well written press releases etc. A professional, attractive and friendly website is one of the most effective tools used today to communicate to your market place why people should do business with you. Websites are open 24/7 and the size of the computer screen levels the playing field between you and larger companies, at least from a communication point of view. IBM website is viewed on the same monitor as your website! It solely and only depends on you to "wow" your visitors and make their website visit excellent. A well done website can be one of the best tools to support your sales and marketing engine and through new social media capabilities can even differentiate you from competitors.

Lastly, your membership and affiliation with reputable organizations and trade association will help you and your people build their professional networks and get your "message" to those that can influence your business. A consistent and professionally communicated message is your key to success.

In the retail trade location, location, location is the number one priority. In leadership excellence communication, communication, communication is the key ingredient.

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