

Communication: The Core of Leading Effectively

Communication is the foundation for relationship building or breakdowns. We are in a constant state of communication whether we are aware of it or not. As human beings, we frequently are thoughtless or unconscious about what we are communicating and the impact of our communication on others. It is an ability we too often take for granted or to which we assign little import.

The reality is that communicating is a difficult and complex activity. The mere desire to send information out from ourselves to another requires that:

Sender

1. I intend to send a particular message.
2. I communicate the message.
3. I believe I sent the particular message I intended and the particular message was heard as intended.
4. I may or may not ask for feedback to assure the particular message was heard as intended.

Receiver

5. I heard a message.
6. I assign meaning to the message from my own frame of reference.
7. I think I understand the particular message as intended.
8. I may or may not provide feedback that I did or did not understand the particular message as intended.

This is the first level of communication and at any point along the eight aspects of communication there could be a failure to send or hear the particular message as it was intended. There are many barriers that challenge good communication and the ability to manage these barriers raises communication to an art.

Good communication is the ability to align your message in a way that resonates to your real thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. So, what I am communicating reflects what I am really thinking, how I feel, what I believe, and how I am behaving. The other half of effective communication is listening. Listening is wanting to hear. Take a moment to rate yourself on a scale of 1–10, with 1 representing an ineffective communicator and 10 representing an effective communicator. Also, rate yourself as a listener using the same scale (1 being distracted listener and 10 being an active listener).

The Knowledge & Skills of Effective Communication

1. What are the core ingredients that make communication effective? Be specific.
2. What are five significant barriers to effective communication?
3. What is the influence of your “family of origin” on your communication style? Be specific.
4. What is the difference between verbal and non-verbal communication? Which is more likely to be authentic? Why?
5. What does self-awareness have to do with being an effective communicator? Be specific.
6. Name some of the best communicators you know or know of. What made them so effective? Be specific?
7. Please describe the relationship between being an effective communicator and an effective leader? Think broadly.

What are the core ingredients that make communication effective?

1. Seek first to understand than to be understood.
2. Develop exquisite listening skills. This requires focused listening, not mentally preparing a response, while the other person is communicating.
3. Discipline yourself on a daily basis to increase your self-awareness.
4. Get comfortable with being told ‘no;’ being disagreed with and criticized; and with strong emotional responses.
5. Allow other people to own their own reactions, mental and emotional, to your messages.
6. Find out what other people require to feel respected when involved in a communication transaction.
7. Become flexible and open to individual and cultural diversity aspects of communication.
8. Be willing to challenge your own assumptions, judgments, and biases.
9. Give yourself permission to error and to apologize if necessary.
10. Find the existing common ground with the person or people you are communicating with and begin the communication by stating it clearly.

The Knowledge & Skills of Effective Communication (cont.)

What are common barriers to effective communication?

Fear is a critical barrier to effective communication. Many of us devise elaborate communication patterns to protect ourselves from disapproval, rejection, criticism, being seen as wrong, being told “no,” or being discounted, etc. Most of these patterns began with our family of origin and our relationship to authority figures.

In order to feel safe we try to hide our fear and take on indirect communication patterns. The two most dominant patterns are placater and blamer. As a placater, I am seen as a “yes” person and am prone to burnout because I allow myself to be taken advantage of. Some of my placating patterns include: saying yes when I really want to say no; avoiding difficult conversations, withdrawing, and masking.

As a blamer, I possess the same or similar fear as the placater, but instead, I keep people at a distance by dominating communication and blaming others when things go wrong or mistakes are made. I may engage in labeling behaviors, criticism of others, controlling behaviors or when feeling high fear, attacking or aggressive behaviors, such as shouting, name calling, put-downs . . . in general, making other feel small and wrong, and as if they don't matter.

For both placaters and blamers conflict is difficult and they exhibit their unique pattern as a way to hide their fear and prevent the conflict from occurring, thus preventing them from losing face! Fear also contributes to poor listening skills which is another primary barrier to effective communication. Poor listening leads to misinformation, confusion, contradictions, unnecessary disagreements, misinterpretation, and poor problem-solving and decision-making processes.

Another barrier to effective communication is a weak or non-existent feedback system. Feedback provides an opportunity to communicate my understanding of the information shared and provides an opportunity for clarification, the appropriateness of the communication, and whether the message/information needs to be clarified, etc.

A lack of organization around how the information will be communicated (verbal/written, announcements, meetings, e-mail, etc.), to whom the information will be provided, how often, and what the feedback process will be, significantly contribute to poor communication processes.

There are many other barriers to communication; however, those identified above are those that need to be addressed and prevented for effective communication to occur.

The Knowledge & Skills of Effective Communication (cont.)

What is the influence of one's "family of origin" on their communication styles?

Our family of origin has a significant influence on our communication patterns. Parents, siblings, and grandparents all have influenced us as children both verbally and through body language. As children we learn quickly what is safe to say, whether it is safe to communicate openly or if we have to camouflage what we say. Our parents frame our relationship with authority figures when we are children, and teachers, along with religious institutions, either support or counteract that relationship.

Not much has been written about our family of origin's influence on our communication styles as we grow into adults; but more and more research is illustrating the relationship between our role as communicators in the workplace to what we learned as children in our family of origin.

What is the difference between verbal communication and non-verbal communication? Which is more authentic?

Verbal communication is "spoken" communication. Non-verbal communication is body language which accompanies verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes facial expressions, voice tone and inflection, hand/leg movements, eye contact, body tension, etc. When there is dissonance between the verbal and non-verbal communication of an individual, experts rely on the non-verbal messages because they are more difficult to control and self-monitor, and therefore are more apt to be the more authentic message.

What does self-awareness have to do with being an effective communicator?

Self-awareness is the foundation of personal growth. The more aware we are of our physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual tendencies, including our fears, passions, and knowledge, as well as knowledge gaps, strengths/weaknesses, motivations, communication style and patterns, the more choices we are able to offer ourselves to change and to grow past our weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

The more self-aware we are, the more we know what our needs are and how to ensure those needs are met, which is a genuine way to engage in self-care. Becoming an effective communicator is a growth process, based in self-awareness which includes affirming our self-esteem and self-worth by engaging in daily self-care.

The Knowledge & Skills of Effective Communication (cont.)

When we are comfortable being direct in our communication, while communicating in a way that respects your own authenticity as well other people in general, then our values, beliefs, thoughts, emotions and behaviors are aligned, and we present to others our truest, most authentic self; and we do so from a place of confidence, not self-doubt; face-forward and not placating or blaming; from a place of strength and not fear.

Who are the best communicators you have ever known? What characteristics make them such effective communicators?

Some of the finest, well known communicators were able to move through conflict or issues which polarized communities, if not nations. Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., are two American historical figures who addressed the issue of civil rights almost 100 years apart. Both men spoke to mankind's higher nature, raising our spirits, not pulling them down. Both men lived their values and beliefs, and communicated them with clarity and focus. Their own authenticity allowed us to find that place within ourselves; their commanding presence spoke to the need for basic human unity. They also both approached both the heart and mind of the individuals they led, allowing them to grow taller through empathy and acceptance. Their method was one of gentle but obvious and persistent persuasion; while their communication styles were distinctly different, their message, nonetheless, was unwaveringly clear.

What is the relationship between being a strong communicator and an effective leader?

Community is a face to face group in which the liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited, or as close to it as it is possible to get. Trust, respect, and ethical behavior prevail and the leader constantly communicates that by his or her behavior and words. The leader is in internal alignment with his or her beliefs, values, emotions, and thoughts, and is externally aligned because his behaviors resonate to the leader's internal core. The leader enriches by his presence, and realizes it is terribly important to know both about him- or herself and about others, making it safe for others to become self-aware.

The Knowledge & Skills of Effective Communication (cont.)

Simply stated, one cannot be an effective leader and not be an effective communicator; and, an effective communicator may be assigned leadership by others because of their ability to build relationships through their strong communication style. When we are effective communicators, we automatically build trust and respect through our authenticity. The message this sends, both verbal and non-verbal, is permission for the other to also be their authentic selves, which keeps the communication environment open, honest, direct with minimal or no fear distorting the information communicated.