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Effective Verbal Communication with Employees

Very often as managers we give instruction to employees only to have the message misinterpreted, which can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and conflicts. Employees significantly influence the outcome of any work project. If you, as a manager, communicate strategically and with purpose, you are more likely to see employees working with a common purpose towards shared goals. Effective communication helps us connect with others, build trust and respect, and improve teamwork. Communicating may seem easy, but communicating effectively actually takes time and practice. Choosing the right words, actively listening, and getting the message across are skills we all need to improve. Next time you find yourself in the middle of a misunderstanding, try one of the following tips to help resolve the issue.

Listen

One of the most important parts of communication is not speaking at all. Active listening allows us to fully engage in the information that is being conveyed as well as understand the emotions the speaker is trying to communicate. You are also building a stronger, deeper connection with the person by making him or her feel heard and understood. Don't just listen to give a reply, listen intently (without interruption) to fully understand the issue. Listening is critical as a manager because it helps form good relationships and encourages more open communication in the workplace.

Next time, try this:

- Avoid interrupting. Think about what the person is saying and repeat it in your mind as he or she speaks. This prevents your mind from wandering and allows you to focus on the situation at hand.
- Try not to redirect the conversation to you and your concerns. In conversation, people often focus on what they are going to say next. Listening is not

the same as waiting for your turn to talk. You can't concentrate on what the speaker is saying if you are forming a reply.

- Stop everything you are doing and show interest in what is being said. Maintain eye contact, nod occasionally, smile, and encourage verbal comments. Monitor your facial expressions and posture. Speakers can often read facial expressions and know if your mind is somewhere else.

Keep the Message Simple

Effective communicators are able to take very complex messages and break them down into clear and concise information that employees are able to grasp and act upon. Say what you mean in as few words as possible and avoid technical jargon and business talk.

Next time, try this:

- Make the most important point at the beginning. If your direction turns into a lecture, you risk losing the employee's attention. Follow your point with an example and then gauge the listener's reaction to see if further detail is needed.
- Be assertive and communicate clearly and directly. Being assertive does not mean being hostile, aggressive or demanding. Being assertive allows the expression of thoughts, feelings, and needs in an open and honest way.
- Wrap up with a summary that reiterates the instructions. Employees benefit from hearing instructions twice.

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Be Engaged

Show employees you care about them and their work. Interact with people face-to-face and build personal connections by taking an interest in both their personal and professional lives. Employees often need to feel a personal connection to you and the work you believe in.

Next time, try this:

- Put your phone and any other distractions away. You can't communicate effectively if you are multi-tasking, daydreaming, texting, or thinking about what you are going to say next. Stand up straight, look the person in the eye, and stay focused on the moment.
- Focus fully on the speaker. If you are distracted, you're going to miss nonverbal cues and the emotion behind the message. Focus on the speaker's body language, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues.

Communicate Face-To-Face

Technology has infiltrated the workplace to the point that it has had a detrimental effect on personal relationships. Emails and text messages can often be misconstrued: instructions can be misunderstood and carried out incorrectly, and words can be misinterpreted as bossy or angry. Communicating without gestures and smiles can give the recipient the wrong idea, especially when the sender isn't an articulate writer.

Next time, try this:

- Instead of sending an email or text message, talk to your employee face-to-face. If that is not possible, pick up the phone and call.
- Use body language to convey positive feelings. Stand tall, maintain eye contact, and smile. It makes you feel more self-confident and puts the other person at ease.

Handle Disagreements Tactfully

Every manager clashes with employees at some point. You don't always need to like an employee or agree with their ideas, values, or opinions, but you do need to respect that employee. In the workplace, it is important to be professional, set aside judgment, and withhold blame and

criticism in order to fully understand a person. To maintain effective communication in stressful situations, be aware of and in control of your own emotions. It doesn't do anyone any good if you misread people or a situation, send confusing signals, or lapse into unhealthy behaviors.

Next time, try this:

- Instead of openly disagreeing, try to gain more information about the situation by asking questions and listening first.
- Avoid knee-jerk reactions by taking a moment to calm down or postponing the conversation.
- Consider compromising. Finding a happy middle ground can reduce the stress level for everyone and improve the relationship for the future.
- Confront issues in a timely manner. To prevent small conflicts from evolving into major crises, nip it in the bud as soon as possible. Allowing an issue to persist creates resentment, frustration, and negative feelings.
- When responding to conflict, do so with an open mind and nonjudgmental approach. Avoid personal attacks, ask questions, and actively listen.

Effective Communication is Two-Way

As a manager, it is important to be able to provide good instruction and also assess how employees understood the instructions. Managers tend to focus intently on the message and forget to tune into the response. Overwhelming amounts of information, technical information, or inexperience can prevent an employee from understanding a task. To ensure your message is understood exactly the way you intended, listen to the other person's interpretation.

Next time, try this:

- Ask the right questions to be sure you were understood. Open ended and leading questions, such as who, what, where, when, and how, can help flush out issues and ensure directives are understood.
- Listen to employees with eyes and ears. Listen and hear what is being said. Look for nonverbal cues to see if the message was understood.
- Allow a way for employees to give anonymous feedback. An employee may not feel comfortable

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addressing the manager directly. Providing an anonymous system can ensure all employees have a voice while also giving insight on your own communication strategies.

Recognize Nonverbal Signals

Nonverbal communication, or body language, can often be overlooked. Nonverbal communication includes facial expressions, body movement and gestures, eye contact, posture, tone of voice, muscle tension and breathing. By observing how people look, listen, move, and react, words aren't always needed to communicate feelings. Nonverbal communication should reinforce what is being said.

Next time, try this:

- Encourage communication with open body language. Uncross your arms, stand with an open stance, sit on the edge of your seat, or maintain eye contact.
- If you are receiving a negative comment or you are having a disagreement, be aware of negative body language. Try not to cross your arms, avoid eye contact, or tap your feet. Even if you disagree with the speaker, avoid sending negative signals so the other person does not become defensive.

Provide Feedback

Employees need to know you recognize and appreciate their efforts or that you expect them to work harder. Both positive and negative feedback should be shared with your employees in a clear and detailed manner.

Next time, try this:

- Know when to have a private conversation. If an employee needs to be reprimanded or receive constructive criticism, do so in private. Be direct and clear about the situation and what needs to change.
- Offer solutions if there is a problem. Ask questions to understand what led to the problem.
- Provide positive feedback. Praise and recognition make employees feel important, which motivates them to work harder.

Effective communication is always about understanding the other person, not about winning an argument or forcing your opinions on others. By effectively communicating with employees, we can build trust and respect, improve teamwork, help others feel heard and understood, and improve decision making and problem solving. In the workplace we can all improve our communication skills to become more effective leaders.

Resources:

Contributions by the 2015 STMA Information Outreach Committee
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/susantardanico/2012/11/29/5-habits-of-highly-effective-communicators/>
<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships/effective-communication.html>