

The Power of Clear Communication

We know productivity is the pathway to profits. And in this high-tech world, it's fashionable to look to technology to solve productivity problems. But, before you invest in new-fangled frills, don't forget to focus on old-fashioned communication skills.

You can increase productivity by increasing the quality of communication in your organization. Beyond heightening efficiency, a quality communication culture creates client satisfaction, motivates marketing, supports self-esteem, maximizes morale and reinvigorates respect for others.

Quality communication has three components: It's clear, constructive and consistent.

KEEP IT CLEAR

The workplace is filled with unclear communication that can confuse people and result in wasted time as employees try to figure out how to start a task or do it incorrectly.

To enhance clarity, encourage people to think before they communicate.

For example, highly educated people may still give unclear directions. I once heard a CPA tell his secretary to, "include all of the documents that are required and don't include any of the documents that are not required."

Needless to say, the secretary was still in the dark about what was required and not required.

Clear directions should include specific, detailed lists. And, make it a policy at your firm to promote questions. Instead of asking, "Do you have any questions?" ask, "What are your questions?"

When setting deadlines, avoid "ASAP" or "When you get a chance." Similarly, vague quality standards, such as "it should have a professional look" or be "well-written" and "thorough," undermine the final product. Quality standards should be explicit, such as "no typos" or "all names spelled correctly."

FOLLOW UP

Even with clear directions and lots of questions, some people may move in the wrong direction. Instead of waiting until it's too late, arrange a brief follow-up meeting when you can listen to your coworker or employee explain their understanding of the task.

In a quality communication culture, delegators take responsibility for being understood, instead of shifting the burden of learning to the student. Delegators should identify the confusion and keep trying to turn on the light bulb. If confusion still exists, you could say, "I'm not doing a good enough job of explaining this to you. Can you tell me how I could be more clear?"

STAY FOCUSED

In addition to taking responsibility for clarity, stay focused. Some people love to hear themselves talk and waste time communicating irrelevant information. Not only does this sabotage productivity, it jeopardizes the listener's respect and willingness for future interaction. Consider staying on task with a list of issues that need to be addressed.



KEEP IT POSITIVE

Constructive communication is motivational and invites further interaction. Unfortunately, many people deliver negative messages.

People who receive negative messages tend to produce less. Negativity could steal an hour of productivity or even waste days or weeks. And, negativity can mushroom to involve many other people in an organization, which reduces their productivity as well. Worst of all, it can result in litigation, which may be the greatest time-waster.

Be bold and ban communication that is not constructive. This includes: cruelty, focusing criticism on people instead of problems; micro-managing; impatience, instead of recognizing a need for more training; blame, assuming employees are lazy vs. realizing you have failed to motivate them; public humiliation; angry behavior; and sarcasm, even if it is meant in jest.

MAKE EXPECTATIONS KNOWN

The most constructive form of communication may be motivation, which requires two ingredients:

- * A perception of benefit. People need to feel that the task will be valuable to the organization and ultimately to them.
- * Achievable steps. If people have the tools and skills to get a job done, they will have confidence in their ability to be successful.

Ways to create a quality communication culture include: encouraging discussions about communication from top to bottom; creating loop lists so no one is excluded from client status reports; and teaching consistent e-mail and memo structure.

Above all, if you really want to improve communication, commit to it. Create a culture that supports it. Teach and compliment quality communication. Then, enjoy the productivity.

Lawrence M. Kohn

www.kohncommunications.com

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