

The Advisor

Resources for Supervisors, Managers, and Human Resources Personnel

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Communication: A Key to Leadership

Repeatedly, we hear about the importance of effective communication in the workplace. Nonetheless, communicating clearly, both verbally and in writing, and doing so with sensitivity to others, remains a difficult skill to master.

For leaders, a continuous improvement approach to communication skills development is essential. Placing value on this interpersonal attribute also demonstrates its importance to your team. Here are some simple ways to strengthen your interactions within your workplace:

- **View communication as role modeling.** When it comes to communication, it is important to lead by example. When writing memos or emails, make certain you use correct grammar and spelling. If this is not your strong suit, ask someone with good proofreading skills to review these items before distribution. When speaking or writing, avoid using slang terms or language that you would prefer your employees avoid (if you swear, they will swear, etc.). You set the tone for what is and is not appropriate communication within your workplace.
- **Consider which modality to use.** Today, there are many modes of communication at your disposal — email, voice mail, phone conversation, team meeting, text, face-to-face interactions, etc. Modalities matter. For example, announcements that will have a substantive impact on an entire team are best delivered in a meeting, which affords people the opportunity to ask questions and offer



comments. Obviously, concerns about performance issues and other sensitive information are best handled one-on-one and privately. Written communication (including email) is often helpful in providing operational or technical information or instructions. Any message with emotional content or the potential for creating confusion on the part of the recipient usually calls for verbal communication. We've all experienced how easy it is to read emotional tone into emails, such as an impertinent attitude that was not intended by the sender.

- **Consider your audience.** When you are deciding how to approach a conversation or

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compose an email, try putting yourself in the place of the recipient(s). For example, when speaking to a customer, it is likely you would avoid using technical or industry-specific terms that you know are beyond that individual's comprehension. The same rule applies to communication with employees. Tailor your message to the knowledge and experience of the person to whom you are speaking or writing. With written communication, it sometimes helps to read it to yourself out loud or have a trusted colleague look it over before sending.

- **Keep it simple.** Focus on using clear, simple language to make your point. Look for ways to boil down complex or technical concepts into understandable terminology, and use metaphors, analogies or anecdotes to illustrate your main point. Given the amount of information the average employee receives each day, it is important to employ an economy of words. People will appreciate that. Less is more.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Remember that emotion-driven or impulsive messages can easily engender backlash, gossip and rumors, so think carefully about how you package your information. As a general rule, if you are upset, take a timeout before deciding how, when and in what way to deliver your message. In the realm of verbal communication, if you are addressing a difficult subject, consider preparing talking points that can guide your part of the interaction.

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- **Be aware of body language and tone of voice.** When conversing face-to-face, people react more to your body language and verbal tone than they do to the meanings of the words you use. If you appear tense, nervous or distracted, people may think these behaviors reflect how you feel about them. Your message will be much more effective if you remain focused on the other person, maintain periodic eye contact, and truly listen to what she or he has to say. When attending presentations, stay focused on the speaker. If you appear restless or distracted, your team will take that as permission to stop paying attention as well.
- **Listen.** It's not uncommon for managers to be the last to know when a problem arises. Often, this is because employees are reluctant to put themselves at risk by owning up to mistakes or bringing problems to your attention. While it is important to maintain an open door

policy and encourage employees to talk to you about their concerns, keep in mind that you may learn more from indirect conversations and casual interactions than from direct discussions. Listening is a key skill for anyone in business, but it becomes of increasing value the higher you move up the managerial ladder. To be effective in one-to-one conversations, encourage the

other person to do most of the talking. You learn more and it builds rapport with your employees.

- **Communicate, or else.** Employees will pay attention to what you do say, but they will also pay attention to what you don't say. When employees recognize or

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How Do I Say That

If one of your direct reports is having difficulty meeting appropriate standards for communication within your workplace, consider these tips:

- **Document.** Compile examples of the employee's inappropriate written or verbal communication. Consider if the problem is something that might be addressed through training or education or if the difficulty is related to behavior or demeanor (such as using inappropriate or aggressive language).
- **Consult with Human Resources.** Talk to HR about your concerns and the impact it is having on both internal and external customers. Investigate what resources the organization may provide for improvement. You may also want to consult with the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service.
- **Schedule a private meeting.** Sit down with the employee to discuss your concerns and their impact. For example: *"I've noticed a lot of spelling errors in your emails. I am concerned that your correspondence with customers may have the same errors and create a poor impression."*

- **Listen to the employee's response.** In this example, the errors may be a result of discomfort with software or unfamiliarity with technical terminology. Ask where the employee feels he or she needs more assistance and, if so, determine the best way to provide necessary training or support.
- **Make a referral to LifeMatters® by Empathia.** If communication errors indicate a drop in performance or engagement, consider making a performance referral to LifeMatters. LifeMatters can also assist with addressing personal issues that may be disrupting the employee's performance.
- **Follow up.** Periodically meet with the employee to discuss his or her progress and areas in need of continued improvement. If performance expectations are still not being met, talk to Human Resources about appropriate next steps. Consult with HR before taking any disciplinary action.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to provide coaching and assistance with a variety of management-related concerns. Call anytime.



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believe that you are withholding information, they will make up their own version of what is going on . . . and it will usually be incomplete or just plain wrong. Give as much information as is reasonable and appropriate. In this case, more is more.

- **Don't make promises you can't keep.** Before you make a commitment to your team, be certain that you intend to make good on your promise. Also, keep in mind that the only thing that undermines a team's faith in its leader faster than a broken promise is a lie (or what they perceive to be a lie). If you can't answer a question, don't make something up — either say "I don't know" or "I am unable to discuss that at this time," depending upon which response is most appropriate.
- **Solve problems.** Good communication

Language assistance services in your preferred spoken and written languages are available at no cost by calling 1-800-367-7474.

is a key aspect of problem solving. When someone presents a concern, listen carefully, ask questions, and discuss possible solutions. Being perceived as a person that others can turn to when difficulties arise is an important leadership quality, and creating this perception requires being a good communicator and, even more so, a good listener.

Being an effective communicator is as important to leadership success as maintaining your technical skills and business acumen. The **LifeMatters®** by Empathia Management Consultation Service is available to provide coaching and assistance with improving these skills and becoming a stronger leader. In addition, the following books may be of interest:

Mastering Communication at Work: How to Lead, Manage, and Influence by Ethan F. Becker and Jon Wortmann, McGraw-Hill, 2009

Improving Communication in the Workplace by Timothy F. Bednarz, Majorium Business Press, 2011

The Hard Truth About Soft Skills: Workplace Lessons Smart People Wish They'd Learned Sooner by Peggy Klaus, HarperBusiness, 2008

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