

COMMUNICATION IN PRACTICE: HOW TO OPTIMIZE TEAM SUCCESS

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You will be faced with situations in which team members or clients have allowed their emotions to cripple communications, destroy motivations and ruin the balance within team dynamics.

The worst way to motivate someone or change a behavior is to communicate in a way that seems like a personal attack or a blow off. It is easy to say something that is taken personally. You will need to take extra time and practice in how you address situations, approach conversations and handle feedback.

We will review communication approaches and techniques that will hopefully arm you with some tools to handle almost every situation.

You need to recognize that there is no recipe for communication, and each situation is different and calls for a unique approach. When faced with a conflict or complaint, some people will try to relay the blame while others will soak it up; others will bite back with more aggression. These steps can be used regardless of the reaction.

STEP 1: Enhance your EQ (emotional Intelligence)

Emotional Intelligence - Described in terms of 5 stages of personal development

1. Self Awareness:
 - a. Recognizing the importance of your emotions and observing them can offer information about your response in various situations. The more you know yourself, the more you can prevent your emotions from blinding you, instinctively reacting without thought and saying or doing things that will cause damage to relationships.
 - b. Learn your triggers and where you are vulnerable. What causes you to become abrupt or angry? What causes you to withdraw from a situation?
 - c. Acknowledge that you do not actually care all the time and begin to challenge yourself before others.
2. Self Control
 - a. Reframe stressful situations and manage your triggers. The default reaction is to assume actions or words were intentional and to assign false motives. To create a story behind the situation. Challenge yourself, your assumptions and the narrative. Give "benefit of the doubt". Consider that maybe you do not have all the information and try not to let your emotions sabotage your communication.
 - b. Regulate your angry responses and maintain healthy perspective and focus.
 - c. Set aside feelings or ego. Be prepared, even if the person is acting illogically or overstating the problem. You may have to humble yourself initially to be heard even if the person is being unfairly critical. Don't take anything said personally. Whatever is said had no bearing on you as a person and outside of this job.
 - d. Do not be primed by others (especially if you have heard about a situation from another person first).
 - e. Avoid an important decision when emotionally charged.
 - f. Learn to politely set boundaries.

3. Self Motivation
 - a. Use your emotions to motivate yourself and it will increase your ability to work through items productively. It will also enable you to delay gratification, and commit to a solution or plan. People will follow your lead if you are consistent in motivation and commitment to resolution.
 - b. Train your mind to think optimistically. View failure or issue as a challenge that can truly be changed. Pessimism relates to unchangeable realities and therefore hopeless to affect. Consciously choose to improve and change behaviors to optimize results.
 - c. Ask for and accept help.
4. Empathy
 - a. Recognizing and appropriately responding to the emotions of others. This is the practice of reframing to the next level. You are not only giving the benefit of the doubt, but inquiring and recognizing the motivations and intentions behind the circumstance.
 - b. Empathy vs. Sympathy. Sympathy is recreating someone's emotions and making them your own. Reacting to someone else's circumstance. Empathy is considering another's thought process to gain understanding. The ability to recognize and share the emotions of another person. Putting yourself in their shoes.
5. Effectively Managing Relationships

Once the four other emotional competencies are mastered, you can then use these abilities to influence, persuade, motivate and inspire. This moves past mastery of your own emotions and into the realm of mastery of the emotions of others.

STEP 2: Listen and Understand

Everyone wants to be heard and they want you to do something to solve their issue. Your role as a leader is to absorb stress, not add to it. It's human nature to try and fast track the process of gathering information. Be patient. Take the time to listen.

1. Start the dialogue with a neutral statement (ex: Let's go over what happened? Please tell me why you are upset). Remain Neutral.
2. Active Listening. Do not plan out what you are going to say. Control facial expressions and body language while listening. Resist the urge to interrupt or solve the problem right away. Avoid the temptation to respond immediately. Listen with the intention to learn and understand, not with the intention of forming a response. When faced with multiple or collective issues, help the other person to prioritize the list of problems.
3. Replace assumptions with questions. Ask questions to be sure you have identified the true problem and have understood their perspective completely.
4. Be aware of hidden agendas. (unspoken messages between people containing some motive or resentment) blocks effective communication. Destroys trust. Brings on feelings of being misunderstood. Everyone has them. How to address? Acknowledge them. Avoid judgement of right or wrong. Turn focus toward future and movement away from the past.
5. Recognize the SOURCE of the information is almost as important as the information.
6. Don't criticize, condemn or complain. However, you can challenge or entertain the opposite perspective. Always challenge ideas and behaviors, not people.
7. Understand their goals. Level with the person. Ask them what they want or what they are hoping to get as a resolution.

STEP 3: Address and Resolve

1. Strive for engagement. Fight, flight or engage (flight = avoid conflict, fight = combat the issue, engage = between the two extremes). This is where conflicts are proactively surfaced, discussed, managed or resolved.
2. Get in the right mindset. If you feel someone is being unreasonable, you may start to get upset. Focus on controlling yourself before communicating with others. Be careful of your body language. This must match your verbal communication.
 - a. Nonverbal skills:
 - Body orientation and position (use of space)
 - Posture (Yours and theirs)
 - Facial expressions. Control yours. Monitor theirs. If the facial expression doesn't match the communication, discuss and ask probing questions.
 - Eye contact. Frequent shows interest. Too much can intimidate. Too little can seem uncaring.
 - b. Verbal Communication
 - Be aware of tone, voice and word selection
 - Speak with a calm but confident voice
3. Focus 100% of your attention on the person and finding a solution. Focus mostly on the solution. Do not spend too much time dwelling on the problem. This refocuses the negative emotions toward some more positive ones. Provide reassurance and support even if you are not agreeing. Show respect for others' opinions and viewpoints especially if you do not share the same.
4. Offer a solution, or at least a plan for the solution. Identify problems that need you, problems that need coaching and help, problems that do not need you when developing the solution and plan. Avoid empty statements (e.g., the employee handbook says it's our policy). If you are not sure how to fix it, ask your manager. Admit when you have no answers
5. Thank them! You want to encourage and reward the trust and faith in you. End the interaction on a positive note.

STEP 4. Action and Follow Up

Present a solution. Take action and follow through.

1. If it's a matter of urgency... act quickly. If it's a matter of privacy/security... be careful. If it's a matter of inaccuracy... double check.
2. Notify your manager and anyone else relevant. Follow any HR process as warranted.
3. Keep the person informed every step of the way, especially if there is any delay or length of time between incident and solution.
4. If it doesn't make sense to you, it won't to them. Make sure you know and feel confident in the solution before you present it.
5. Let the other person save face. Use encouragement and make the fault or mistake easy to correct.
6. Learn from the situation. Reduce the risk of another occurrence. Identify how it started in the first place. Is this a pattern? What is the bottleneck or underlying issue?