

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Clear Communication: Swimming Against the Stream

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I've never worked with an organization that did not complain of internal communication problems. It's a universal disease. Even though communication is the most basic of human functions, we're evidently not very accomplished at it.

The Deletion Stream

One major complication in communicating is what I call the "deletion stream." This stream begins to flow the moment we observe something.

Imagine, for instance, that you witness an event, an automobile accident near your home. A series of deletions starts immediately, in the very act of "seeing." The eye can actually process several times more data than the optic nerve can transmit. So before the visual sensations ever make their way to the brain, most of the information the eye took in has been deleted.

Next, a whole set of filters, operating outside of conscious awareness, go to work on the incoming data. These filters determine how much attention you pay to various elements in the scene you've witnessed. Will you be more attuned to the movement? The surroundings? The people? The expressions on their faces? Will you take more notice of specific details in the scene? Or will you be more absorbed by other activities going on around the event?

Creating A Deep Structure

Each of these decisions, made in only a fraction of a second, activates filters that delete additional information from your thought flow. Before a memory is even moments old, it's already laced with deletions. Then the information starts moving from short-term memory to long-term memory, where it becomes a "deep structure" in the mind — "deep" because it's well below the surface and not always easy to access.

A few days later neighbors ask you to describe what you saw. The mind goes searching for the deep structure, and finding it, brings a cluster of details to the surface. Not all the details. Only some of them. A further deletion has just occurred. Once more unconscious filters are at work, running unnoticed.

As you begin to describe the event, you are unlikely to go into every detail you've surfaced. Instead, you summarize what you saw (a further deletion in the form of a generalization). "Two big cars had a wreck in the intersection right beside our house."

That's the summary. But deleted from the description are hosts of specifics. What kind of cars were they? What color? Was it a rear-end accident? Head on? Side collision? How many passengers were involved? Was anyone injured?

You've not stated those details. But the people listening have already begun to form images of the accident in their minds. We think in pictures. And when someone makes a statement, the mind must fashion a picture to process the information. And where the information is incomplete, the mind makes up details to round out the picture.

Forming Judgments

Simultaneously your hearers begin putting meaning on what you've said. Let's imagine that your description was more detailed: "A blue SUV crossed over the median beside our house, and hit a red sports car head on. They had to carry the man in the sports car to the hospital."

The hearer shakes his head, thinking, "My, what a careless driver. People like that ought to be taken off the road." In his mind he has already made judgments and assessed blame. What you failed to mention is that the SUV was swerving to miss a child who ran into the street after a ball. But that single omitted detail allows the hearer to draw unfounded conclusions.

When your hearer repeats the story to a group of friends, he will think he's true to the facts when he says, "Some careless driver nearly killed a guy down the street." Not only has he now maligned the driver's character, he has now made it a "fact" that someone was nearly killed. You never said that. You only reported that a man was taken to the hospital. You said nothing about the seriousness of his injuries, or even if he had any known injuries at all.

Beyond that, this latest group of hearers have no indication that the injured man was in another car. He might have been a pedestrian. Or a passenger in the SUV. Or someone on a bicycle. There are a lot of blanks in their information. Nevertheless, these new hearers have already started building their own personal mental picture of what happened, based on how each person "fills in the blanks."

Swimming Upstream

Obviously we could carry this story through several more iterations. But you get the point. Communication is a continuous process of deleting information — UNLESS WE CHOOSE TO SWIM UPSTREAM!!

And we swim upstream by asking clarifying questions. One of the most fruitful communication skills is pressing habitually for appropriate details. When we press for details, we go against the flow of the deletion stream. And the information we recover often prevents unfortunate misunderstandings.

Here are some important questions to have at your finger tips constantly:

- Could you tell me a bit more about that?

- Help me get a clearer picture of what you're saying. Can you fill in a few more details?
- When you say, " _____," what does that mean, specifically?
- Can you give me a concrete example of what you've just referred to?
- You've said that what they've done means _____. What leads you to believe it really means that?
- Could you describe what led to the event you just mentioned?

Each of these questions (and others like them) can surface details that would otherwise go uncovered. And some of the newly uncovered information may be vital to proper understanding.

Use questions like this often. Make them a habit. And as you're developing this habit, note carefully the image you have in your mind before you ask one of these questions. Then, fire off your question, listen to the answer, and immediately notice how much the new information has changed your mental image.

You'll be surprised at how often these types of questions lead to an entirely different picture from the one you originally held. And the experience will soon convince you to use this technique regularly — so often it becomes second-nature to you.

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