

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Seven Levels of Communication

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This year I'm doing more communication coaching and training than I've ever done. And this has stimulated me to create a number of additional models, diagrams, and charts to help leaders understand the communication process.

One of these charts is what I call the Seven Levels of Communication. In this issue I want to share an overview of these levels with my readers.

But first, let me offer the definition of "communication" around which I build my trainings.

Defining "Communication"

Communication is not mere conversation or speech-making, although both may be used to communicate. Instead, communication is closely tied to its Latin origin, the word *communis*. In the Latin-speaking world, this term referred to "that which we share in common." And it gives us words that point to an underlying commonality, such as "community" and "communion"

Thus, I define communication as "verbal and non-verbal language whose aim is to bring two or more parties to common ground." This common ground may be mutual understanding, mutual agreement, mutual commitment, or a shared course of action, just to cite a few examples.

That's why mere conversation does not always qualify as communication. Much conversation is simply small talk used to fill time. There is no intent behind the chit-chat to reach common ground.

With that said, let me offer my seven-level model. The levels build logically on one another, in that success at any level depends on success at the levels beneath it.

Level 1: Transactional Communication

This consists of the courtesies, niceties, and conventional phrases that we use to open and close conversations, discussions, or meetings. It also involves routine instructions and requests passed back and forth between people working together on a minor project, such as changing a flat tire or moving a piece of furniture. Or passing out materials at a meeting.

In this case the communication aims at nothing more than keeping an immediate enterprise on track. The communication is not nuanced and the message is typically relayed in only a few words which are immediately grasped and understood.

Level 2: Informational Communication

In business settings, and many others, the primary role of communication is to impart information. The communication may take any number of forms: telling stories, relating experiences, outlining facts, presenting data, etc. The aim is a common understanding of critically important information.

Because this level of communication is so commonplace in business circles, one purpose for developing the seven-level model was to emphasize the importance of taking communication to the higher levels.

Level 3: Clarificational Communication

Information does not always create the common understanding that it was intended to foster. Hearers (or readers) may need additional details. Or they may need a firmer grasp of how certain terms or phrases are being used. Information that has not been communicated with clarity has not been successfully communicated.

The need for clarification usually shows itself in the form of or puzzled looks on the faces of those who are listening or questions that they ask. At other times it becomes evident when people think that they are following the guidance that they have received, only to find that the expectation was something quite different.

Clarification may also be needed when people have misread intentions. A common example is when an email statement, intended as a humorous remark, is taken seriously by another party. Another common point of vital clarification is to explain the context for a statement or the background for a story. Without the proper context in mind, hearers easily impute the wrong meaning to what was said.

Level 4: Evaluational Communication

Once information is transmitted and clarified, evaluations of the information then follow. Is the information good news? Or bad news? Is the data (or the source of data) reliable? Credible? Is this information something that begs for further investigation?

Leadership and management in particular are in the business of evaluating information. It's important to note, however, that clarification must precede evaluation. The clarification step is easily, and all too often, skipped over. We go straight from imparting information (or receiving it) to evaluating it.

The evaluative level of communication is where we express our opinions, our judgments, our conclusions. But if we've not been careful about communication at *both* the informational level and the clarificational level, these opinions, judgments, and conclusions are easily ill-informed.

Level 5: Decisional Communication

Now that we have information, have clarified it, and formed our judgments about it, the judgments may call for decisions to be made. Decisions are rarely stronger than the evaluation that goes into them. This is why we should be hesitant to jump to conclusions. Stepping back and being sure that we have clarified the essential information and have properly evaluated it is a necessary preliminary to good decision-making.

People who are prone to "gut-reaction" decisions are especially vulnerable to "less-than-the-best" decisions. On the other hand, you don't want to spend so much time in information gathering, clarification, and evaluation that you get trapped in the paralysis of analysis. The key is to reach a measured middle ground.

Level 6: Volitional Communication

It's one thing to make a decision. Quite another to carry it out. We've all seen organizations make good decisions, only for the decision to languish in execution. That's because the decision was not adequately followed up with volitional communication.

"Volition" is another word with Latin roots. It means "the will". The volitional level of communication centers on creating motivation, will, and commitment to pursue a cause or a course of action effectively.

Good communicators never assume that just because people participated in and agree with a decision that they are properly motivated and committed to carrying through on it. After all, in our personal lives, how many of us have made a determined decision to lose weight, only to add three more pounds in the next two weeks!

Level 7: Inspirational Communication

Some might classify inspiration with volition and motivation. But I purposefully treat inspiration as a separate category. Someone can be willing to do something, or even be motivated to do it, without necessarily being inspired to do it. Inspiration fires off a passion and a determination that may or may not be present in mere motivation.

Extraordinary leaders are known for excelling at inspirational communication. But any communicator is capable of it. Passion keeps people going, even when will and motivation grow weary. For truly big and vital decisions, therefore, success at the seventh level of communication is invaluable.

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