

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Communication: Getting The Response You Want

by Dr. Mike Armour

As a specialist in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), I often explain NLP basics to people while coaching or training them. When I spell out basic premises of NLP, one principle in particular inevitably takes people aback. Here it is: "The meaning of communication is the response you get."

Of course, that's hardly the way we normally think about "meaning." If asked the meaning of a given statement, we typically answer with the intent and purpose behind the words. Meaning, in other words, is defined in terms of the sender, the one initiating the communication.

Desired Outcomes

But what's the purpose of communication? Isn't it to lead other people to respond in a given way? As a minimum we want them to listen. Beyond listening, however, we are usually looking for an additional response. Perhaps we want them to give us information. Or to nod their head in agreement on a crucial issue. Or to buy the product we're promoting.

When we communicate, in other words, we generally have an intended outcome in mind. Which touches on another vital principle in NLP, namely, "know your outcome." Be crystal clear about what you want to occur before you take any initiative. Never launch until you know the specific outcome you seek.

This means knowing the precise response we are looking for before we communicate. We can then use the hearer's response as feedback to calibrate whether we are moving toward our desired outcome or not. Viewed this way, the most relevant meaning in communication is the one which the hearer attaches to our words or actions, the meaning reflected in the hearer's response.

Making Adjustments

So what happens when the response fails to match your desired outcome? Whose responsibility is it to make adjustments, so that response and desired outcomes align? Our tendency is to put that duty on the hearers. If they would just listen more closely, if they would just be a bit more open-minded, if they would just show a little more spirit of cooperation, then I could get my outcome.

But blaming rarely leads to progress in communication. A far more productive approach is to view it as my own duty to be flexible enough to change my course as a communicator. This doesn't mean giving up on my outcome. It simply means taking a different approach to get there.

Confused Expectations

Recently a senior VP was complaining to me about one of his direct reports, an employee whom I happen to coach. "I tell her what I want," he said, "but she never follows through." I knew from my work with her that she has every desire to follow through, and believes she is doing so. As a result, she becomes confused and demoralized when he tells her that her work doesn't meet expectations.

What's going on here? A resentful, non-cooperative employee, as the VP suggested? Not at all. What we have is a VP who thinks in big pictures and an employee who thinks in details. When he describes a desired outcome to her, it's in broad terms. But he himself has a specific picture in mind as to what that outcome will look like. Unfortunately, he never describes that picture to her in much detail.

This leaves her to fill in the specifics in her own mind. And what happens, all too often, is that the specifics she envisions are not the ones he pictured when he gave her the assignment. The outcome doesn't match his expectations. Thus, to him she has been non-cooperative or even insubordinate.

What I got him to see in a few minutes of conversation is that if he is not getting the response he wants, he must take the responsibility himself for changing the communication pattern to match her way of taking in information and processing it. He has to know what his desired outcome will look like -- precisely. And then he must lay out the specifics of that outcome in detail, so that she's working with the same picture he is.

Forget the Frustration

Like that VP, we are all surprised at times when we get a response that seems foreign to what we anticipated. Commonly we react to those moments with frustration or even upset. Unfortunately, neither frustration nor upset will get our message across. In fact, our frustration and upset may well bleed through in a tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language that only complicate our goal of getting to our desired response.

So when you feel your frustration or upset starting to rise, interrupt those feelings immediately. Turn your focus instead to questions along these lines: "How is it that I got this response? What stood in the way of my message leading to the response I desired? And how can I reword things or approach the subject differently so that I get around that obstacle?"

These questions get your mind off your frustration with the other person and center your attention instead on the communication process itself. These questions also place the emphasis on how others hear rather than on what you've said. Once you've identified what stands in the way of the response you want, then -- and only then -- you can make

proper adjustments in your own style of communication. Adjustments that are more likely to achieve your desired outcome.

Special Note: If neuro-linguistic programming and NLP are new terms for you, [learn more about](#) it elsewhere on this web site.

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