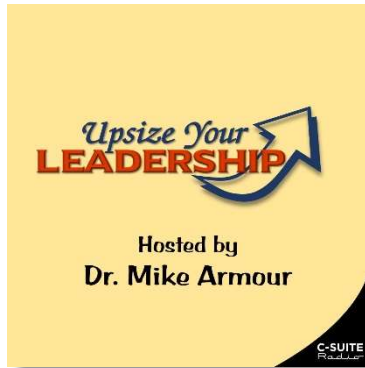


Stop Talking, Start Communicating

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It almost goes without saying that effective leaders are good communicators. After all, they must rally people around the leader's vision and then motivate and inspire those who choose to follow them. Indeed, leadership is so distinctly interpersonal that almost everything a leader does involves communication, either directly or indirectly.

Moreover, since we learn to talk at a very young age, we grow up thinking that we know how to communicate. Yet, if communicating only consisted of talking, we would not have nearly so many communication problems in the world. Conversation and speech-making don't always equate with communication.

So, today I want to take up the topic of communication, especially as it relates to the work of leaders. Upgrading the quality of your communication is one of the surest ways to upsize your leadership.

As an executive coach and leadership developer, I've worked in hundreds of organizations, from mom-and-pop startups to Fortune 25 companies. Along the way, I've learned that there are certain statements which I will never hear in corporate settings. One of those is, "We don't have any communication problems around here."

The truth is, all organizations have communication issues. Some have fewer issues than others. But there are communication breakdowns and failures in any organization, in large part because there are so many ways for miscommunication to occur. In fact, I commonly teach a course or deliver a keynote entitled, "Communication Isn't Difficult: It's Impossible."

I usually begin these presentations by projecting a sketch of two people trying to talk through a tin can telephone. Do you know what I'm referring to? If you're young enough, perhaps not. With cell phones and toy walkie-talkies so readily available to youngsters today, I don't know how many of them build tin can telephones any more. But in my youth, it was a common pass time for kids in my neighborhood.

For those who have no notion of what I'm talking about, the idea was to take two tin cans, two large buttons, and a long stretch of twine to create a device which allowed two people to talk to one another as though they were on a telephone. If the device worked as intended, two people

could stand 20, 30, or maybe 40 feet away from each other, speak in rather quiet tones, and be clearly understood by the other party. We even got one tin can telephone to work at 60 feet.

The contraption was simple to build. You began by punching a hole in the bottom of two empty tin cans from which the lids had been fully removed. Then you ran the ends of the twine up through the holes in the bottom of the cans. You pulled four or five inches of twine through the holes, enough to allow you to lace the twine through holes in the button and tie the string off. Next each person took one of the cans in hand and walked far enough away from one another that the twine was stretched tight. That pulled the two buttons down against the bottom of their respective cans. The button would now pick up any vibrations in the can, and if the string was tight enough, the button would convey these vibrations to the twine.

Thus, when you spoke into a can, your voice created reverberations in the metal and the button passed these vibrations along the twine to the other device. The person on the other end could hold his or her can to an ear and the oscillations on the string would replicate the message inside the second can. So long as the twine was held tight, messages could be easily passed back and forth.

Now, this device served almost no practical value. And the slightest slack in the string broke off communication altogether. But it was a fun thing to do on a hot summer afternoon when you had nothing better to occupy your time.

In the years since, I've come to realize that all communication is just as susceptible to failure as those tin can telephones when the line began to sag, even a little. In a brief podcast like this, I can't even list all of the factors that can contribute to communication breakdowns in an organization, much less survey those factors. Were I to offer such a survey, however, one of the things most prominent on the list would be failure to understand what communication truly is.

Many people think that they are good communicators, when in reality they are merely great conversationalists. They are good at talking, at telling people things. For example, when I'm coaching an executive, I will often ask, "How much do you communicate with your people." Usually the reply is, "I communicate with them all the time."

As I observe this client's behavior over the next few weeks, however, I come to realize that he or she has numerous conversations with colleagues and direct reports. But that precious little of it constitutes true communication. Helping them grasp the difference between conversation and communication then becomes a priority in the coaching engagement.

I have the same goal for today's podcast. At the end of it, I want you to have a clear and distinct understanding of what constitutes communication. And not just communication in general, but various types of communication. In the next few minutes we are going to define communication, identify four different communication processes, and lay out seven different levels of communication.

We begin with the word "communication" itself." It comes from the Latin word *communis*, meaning "common," which gives us the words "community," "communism," and in Christianity "communion." In a community people share common space or a common experience. In communism, everything is owned in common. In religion, "communion" is a ritual in which all who share a common faith participate.

Building on this root concept of commonality, we can define communication as a verbal and/or non-verbal exchange aimed at bringing two or more parties to common ground. This common ground may take the form of a mutual understanding, mutual agreement, mutual commitment, or a mutual course of action.

Notice the prominence of the word “mutual” in these phrases. Mutuality implies the full participation by both parties in reaching common ground. It also implies the willing consent of both parties to the common ground which is reached. Communication is never a one-way street. It’s about two or more parties coming together willingly on common ground which they may not have shared before.

To put it another way, communication is a process by which two or more people come to share common perspectives, values, priorities, attitudes, purposes, aspirations, goals, or plans.

It is this pursuit of a common outcome which distinguishes communication from mere conversation. Communication begins with the assumption, or at least the possibility, that two parties are not entirely on common ground. They perceive themselves as standing in different positions, with differing perspectives and points of view. The aim of communication is to resolve this difference.

Two people reach common ground in one of four ways. Sometimes, after a bit of dialogue, they discover that their positions are not in fact different, but that they had simply misperceived one another’s position. They make this discovery through a process called clarification.

In other cases, the two indeed hold different positions. In this instance, common ground is reached through one of three additional processes. The first is persuasion, through which one party moves to the other party’s position and accepts it. The second is negotiation, by which the two parties abridge their differences by finding a middle ground on which both are willing to settle. The common ground is some mixture of the individual positions which the two parties initially held. The third process is collaboration, in which the two parties jointly reach a position which is new to both of them. For example, collaboration may be the way that two people find a solution to a problem which neither of them has ever faced before.

Finding common ground is most likely to occur when both parties put their focus on understanding the other party and the other party’s point of view. We can illustrate this by revisiting the four processes by which people reach common ground.

The first process (clarification) is focused on the other party’s perceptions and understanding. Clarification springs from a desire to help both parties be as clear as possible in their own thought process and in their grasp of the other party’s perspective. This calls for each party to listen carefully to what the other party says in order to identify areas of misperception, mistaken assumptions, and misinterpretation.

The second process (persuasion) draws its name from a Latin phrase which means to make something thoroughly sweet. Persuasion is the process of making your ideas, recommendations, or decisions as “sweet” as possible for the other party. This then calls for a communication style which always keeps in mind the other person’s tastes.

When we were children, most of us probably had mothers who occasionally put bitter medicine in something sweet (perhaps a spoonful of honey) to make it more palatable. Think of persuasion as the result of making your ideas and conclusions easy for the other person to

swallow. To do this, our focus as communicators must not be on self, but on the other party. That is, we continually ask ourselves, “How can we make our message more ‘palatable’ to others, given their values, outlooks, attitudes, and sense of self?”

The third process (negotiation) is focused on the other party’s interests and values. Negotiation succeeds only if both parties are attuned to what is important for the other party. The goal in negotiation is a compromise in which both parties individually get enough of what they want that they are willing to forego other things which they would like. Finding a workable compromise depends on each party seeking a way to accommodate the other party’s most important interests and values.

The fourth process (collaboration) is focused on the other party’s ideas and contributions. The word “collaboration” suggests an underlying process of “co-laboring.” If my ideas are the only ones which prevail in the final common ground, then the process was not truly collaborative. The same can be said if only the other party’s ideas prevail.

To summarize, then, in clarification we focus on the other party’s perceptions and understanding, in persuasion on the other party’s tastes and preferences, in negotiation on the other party’s interests and values, and in collaboration on the other party’s ideas and contributions. In a word, powerful communicators maintain a tenacious focus on the other party and how that party evaluates information and responds to it.

Based on its aim, we can think of communication as occurring on one of seven levels. The lowest of these – what we will refer to as Level One – is communication aimed at conducting a transaction. It revolves around the accomplishment of a simple task which two or more people are undertaking in common or the establishment of a common framework for such an activity.

We routinely use Level One communication for courtesies, niceties, and conventional phrases which open and close conversations, sales transactions, discussions, or meetings. Or for 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. Such Level One communication is not nuanced and the message is typically relayed in only a few words which are immediately grasped and understood.

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

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

Level Three communication aims at providing clarification. Information conveyed at Level Two 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 puzzled looks on the faces of those who are listening or questions which they raise. At other times it becomes evident when people

think that they are following the guidance that they have received, only to find that something quite different was expected.

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 is said.

Level Four communication aims at carrying out an evaluation. Once information is conveyed and clarified, evaluation of the information then follows. Is the information good news? Or bad news? Is the data (or the source of the data) reliable? Credible? Is this information something which begs for further investigation?

The starting point for evaluation is to process the information properly in terms of its content, the context surrounding it, the non-verbal language in which it was packaged, and any feelings which are attached to it.

Leadership and management in particular are in the business of evaluating information. It is 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, and our conclusions. But if we've not been careful about communication at both the level of information and clarification, these opinions, judgments, and conclusions are easily ill-informed.

Level Five is communication is aimed at effecting a decision. 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 of greater quality than the evaluation which 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 decisions-making.

People who are prone to "gut-reaction" decisions are especially vulnerable to "less-than-the-best" decisions. On the other hand, you do not 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 Six is communication aimed at increasing volition. It's one thing to make a decision. Quite another to carry it out. We have all seen organizations make good decisions, only for the decision to languish in execution. Usually this is the product of not following up the decision with communication which adequately stoked volition.

"Volition" is another word with Latin roots. Derived from the word *voluntas* (which gives us our English words "voluntary" and "volunteer"), "volition refers to the will. Volunteers are people who willingly participate.

Communication to increase volition centers on creating motivation, will, commitment, and determination 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 over the next two weeks!

Level Seven is communication aimed at instilling inspiration. 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 motivated to do it, without necessarily being inspired to do it. Inspiration fires off a passion and a determination which 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 and inspiration keep people going, even when will and motivation grow weary. For truly big and vital decisions, therefore, success at this seventh level of communication is invaluable.

Here again, then, are the seven levels: conducting a transaction, conveying information, providing clarification, carrying out an evaluation, effecting a decision, increasing volition, and instilling inspiration.

Perhaps you have noticed that these seven levels of communication build on top of one another. Each one can succeed only to the degree that the levels below it have been performed well. On the other hand, communication does not pursue these levels in a rote one, two, three sequence up to Level Seven. Complex communication challenges may require looping back to previous levels to overcome a difficulty at the present level. As an example, to effect a decision at Level Five, we may find ourselves needing to go back to Level Three to make some additional clarifications or even to Level Two to gather more information. This added information or clarification may then call for further evaluation at Level Four.

One reason that communication bogs down in organizational settings is that we do not treat these levels of communication discretely. That is, we don't hold ourselves in one particular level of communication until we have completed the work to be done there. Instead, we meander back and forth through all the various levels. Comments descend into a hodge-podge in which information, evaluation and arguments for a particular decision are all lumped together, sometimes in a single statement. The discussion becomes scattered and unfocused. And the meeting may well adjourn with no one feeling that much was accomplished.

To reach common ground effectively, we need proper information, appropriate clarification, unrushed evaluation, and decisions which take into account the perspectives, values, and desires of all concerned parties. The discipline to deal with the levels of communication one at a time and in a proper sequence will go a long way in promoting communication by which the group arrives at common ground which everyone is ready to support.

And to that end, let me conclude by saying that the one thing I want you most to carry away from this discussion is the need to be focused on others in communication. It's easy to go into a discussion or negotiation focused on ourselves – what we are going to say and what we want to gain from the exchange of views. So long as that is our focus, however, we are not listening closely to others. And until we learn to listen and respond appropriately to what others are thinking, feeling, or seeking, we are missing the true potential of communication.

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