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Are you listening?

By Carole Spiers (Pressure Gauge)

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IN BUSINESS, conversations need to have a direction rather than just drifting along. A conversation needs to communicate both ways.

To ensure that your conversations and discussions are efficient and effective, there are three primary considerations:

1. You need to ensure that your message is understood and
2. You must also understand the intended message being sent to you and...
3. The direction of the communication(s) should be controlled

The key learning point is that you must learn to listen as well as to speak. This message is extremely important to your effectiveness as a manager. If you fail to develop the skill of listening, you may not hear the suggestion/information which could make your fortune, or win you a large contract or maybe a senior promotion that could change your life!

How many times during your working week do you find yourself in a situation where you feel that you have communicated an important issue perfectly adequately, but the person you've been speaking to did not, in fact, understand your message?

Last week I looked at the importance of effective communication in reducing the incidence of misunderstanding and consequent problems. We saw how good communication enables employees to work more efficiently, and makes them more readily aligned to the vision and leadership of the organisation. I also explained how this supports a healthy working culture, by ensuring that managers are more aware of the internal and external pressures within their teams.

I received a great response to the column, and the question that a number of you most wanted answered was how to use 'active listening' to help deal with situations such as the above.

The answer is that in many cases, the reality is that you have not been listening as attentively as you could, or should. Reasons for this might be that you are too busy, not interested, have an urgent deadline to meet etc - but whatever the reason, it's important for you to recognise the effects that your lack of attention might be having, and to resolve to practice your communication skills to ensure this does not negatively impact on your business relationships.

Core Skills of Attentive Listening

A CORE skill required for attentive listening is 'empathy', which is defined as 'the power or state of imagining yourself to be 'in the shoes' of the other person, and therefore sharing his or her ideas and feelings'. It has also been called 'the ability to experience another person's world as if it were your own'.

Empathy is about being sensitive, at a given time, to the changing experience of the other person; understanding and sharing but not judging; and accessing the other person's world. Some people have greater natural empathy than others, but anybody can work on improving their empathy skills through exercises such as the following:

- Practice reflecting content with other people. Try to reflect back to them what you think they've said (paraphrasing) and check that your understanding of their message was correct.
- Work on increasing your vocabulary of emotions, to enrich the way you can describe what a feeling is like, and use these to more accurately describe your understanding of what has been said.

Warmth and acceptance are crucial in establishing relationships with people. You need to demonstrate that you respect the person for what they are, for their uniqueness and individuality, and that you also accept that they, like you, have faults - that's human nature!

A genuinesincerity is important for open communication to enable the person opposite you to properly understand what you are saying without having to guess the real meaning of your words. There needs to be a correlation between what you say and your 'body language'. There needs to be a directness and openness about the way you communicate. You should not always be trying to present an image - although we all try to project a favourable image. Be yourself and you will encourage the person with whom you are speaking to respond in a similar manner.

Furthermore, if you are not sure you have understood the other person correctly, then ask for clarification. You can achieve this by asking questions such as 'Could you please explain what you mean by...' or 'Can you be more specific about exactly what you mean by...?'

Effective communication is just one of the topics I'll be exploring in more detail during my forthcoming visit to Dubai (from 2-11 June). I'll be presenting a motivational presentation 'Turn Your Passion Into Profit' at The International Gathering (June 2-6); running an interactive workshop - 'Discover The 7 Steps To Develop Your Professional Presence' sponsored by DBM Arabian Gulf (info@dbmgulf.com) at Knowledge Village on June 11; and hosting a series of Boardroom Briefings on a range of challenges facing Dubai businesses today. So, if you'd like to learn more.

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The INCOMING and OUTGOING messages need to be understood by both sides.

You should exercise some control over the conversation - not let it drift.

Listen attentively if you want to gain from the conversation

Empathy is a skill that is advantageous for attentive listening.

Warmth and acceptance are crucial in establishing relationships.

Accuracy, sincerity and open communication assist communication.

Carole Spiers, the UK's leading Guru on corporate stress-management and organizational change, is also a regular BBC broadcaster and international author on these major, business issues. She is also a regular Motivational Speaker at UAE conferences, Your questions and input on this article or any related topic, will be welcomed. Each Friday, we will discuss a selection of your letters or case-studies. Please write to Carole Spiers at: ktwkd@emirates.net.ae



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