

Back to the Basics of Communication

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For as long as most people can remember, interpersonal communication breakdowns have been the number one factor causing loss of employee efficiency and effectiveness in organizations. Statements such as, "I never know what's going on," "No one ever listens to me or my ideas," or "THEY don't tell me anything," prevail in the typical workplace. As in many other situations, there is probably a bit of truth in all of those comments, along with some degree of individual responsibility. After all, adults are just kids with big bodies! That sounds like a blanket statement, does it not? However, if you consider how most people learned to communicate, starting at a very young age, it makes a little more sense. Consider the following examples of statements related to communication, which many parents and caregivers use with children:

- *Look at me when I am talking to you!* (Often said in a loud, irritated voice)
- *Shut up and listen to me!*
- *No!*
- *Do not talk to me in that tone of voice...*
- *When I ask you a question, you had better answer me...*
- *Do not speak unless you are spoken to.*
- *Children should be seen and not heard.*
- *That is a silly/stupid thing to say.*

The statements above are not exactly the kinds of communication that encourages open dialog or buy in to what you say, are they? Yet, how many times have you heard similar language used when an adult is speaking to a child, or possibly even another adult? The result of such communication is that, while the intent may be to get or give information, gain undivided attention, or facilitate feedback, the effect is often quite the opposite. For most people reared in the United States, the intent of the sample statements mentioned could be valid because:

- Direct eye contact often does indicate interest.
- A communication receiver must listen actively to what is being said in order to understand a message sender's meaning.
- Tone of voice carries many messages.
- When asked a question, the polite action is to respond.
- If someone does not know a lot about a topic, the best way to learn is to patiently listen and then, if appropriate, ask questions.

Unfortunately, unless these concepts are communicated effectively to children in a non-threatening manner, the desired effect is lost. As a result, learning of positive communication techniques often fails and adults repeat negative habits.

So, what are the ways we communicate with others? According to studies done by Albert Mehrabian in the 1960s, and substantiated by others since then, message

meaning and emotion between two people can be impacted significantly and come from the following sources:

Non-Verbal cues, which account for fifty-five (55) percent of message meaning. These include facial expressions, gestures with hands, arms, head, and legs, personal appearance and hygiene, manner of self-presentation (e.g. dress, clothing worn, car driven, arrangement of home/office) and actions or inactions.

Vocal cues account for thirty-eight (38) percent of meaning and include tone of voice, volume (loudness or softness), pitch, rate of speech, and articulation or enunciation of words.

Words used by a speaker and targeted appropriately to a listener's knowledge or level of understanding, account for only seven (7) percent of message meaning. This includes grammar, syntax, use of jargon and various other aspects related to what you say. Do not think that because of a low percentage that words are not important --- they are.

When communicating, keep in mind that in any two-way dialog there are four potential messages involved:

1. The message you want to send.
2. The message you thought you sent.
3. The message you actually sent.
4. The message the receiver understood.

With this in mind, always think of the message that you desire to share before you speak and then ensure that you use the right means of communicating it.

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