



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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How to Handle Communication Mishaps in the Workplace

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THE CANCER THAT EATS AWAY AT RELATIONSHIPS

How much of your leadership success depends on your ability to skillfully relate to others? Whether it's with clients, senior management, staff or co-workers, your ability to effectively communicate and master key relationships could be the most important component of your success and fulfillment.

Assuming this is true, there's a "cancer" of relationships that we all need to be aware of. I'm not sure what to call it, but let me give you some of the symptoms that often follow this progression:

1. Misunderstandings and communication mishaps

- For example, someone says something at a meeting and you're not sure what they mean. It could mean something negative or it may mean something else—you just don't know.

2. Assumption of motive - Based on what someone says (or doesn't say) or what they do (or don't do), you interpret some kind of negative intent (e.g., they don't care, they don't like me, they're unhappy with my performance, they're out to get me, etc.). It's called "mind reading." An example is if a prospect or client is not returning your phone calls and you come up with a negative interpretation of what this means.

3. Relational tension - A misunderstanding, followed by an assumption of bad intent will often result in some sort of relational tension, or even conflict. In our professional culture, conflict isn't usually expressed as outright war, but is often more subtle - ranging from avoidance behaviors to more passive-aggressive ones. More times than not, this relational tension is only experienced by one person in the relationship. The other is often unaware there is a problem!

Take this test: For one day notice how many incidences of misunderstandings, assumption of

motives, communication gaps and relational tension occur around you. The results will astound you.

In my observation, relationship problems (small and large) are prevalent in the business world and, tragically, most of these problems are the result of two people "missing each other" rather than the existence of a significant relational issue.

The result is unnecessary relational pain, sleepless nights, major distraction, high stress, and dysfunctional, or even worse, broken relationships. This dynamic also costs businesses dearly in decreased productivity, employee morale and ultimately, revenue.

SO WHAT'S THE REMEDY?

There are certain "truths" we incorporate over time based on our life experience. One such truth I have is: *the quality of a relationship is directly proportional to the amount of effective communication that exists (or is lacking) in that relationship.* In other words, the less you communicate with someone where there is a potential misunderstanding, the greater chance that the relationship will suffer.

At the risk of making a gross overstatement, I believe there is a tool that will eliminate a significant percentage of the relational pain from our lives: **the clarifying conversation.**

What is a clarifying conversation? It is a conversation designed to clarify the intent behind the words and behaviors (or lack thereof) that have either caused or have the potential of causing tension in a relationship. It's all about killing the monster while it's small. Before our minds make a mountain out of a molehill, let's verify if there really is an issue. And if there is, let's catch it before it becomes something significant.

In my experience, I've found, almost without fail, that everything gets better after a clarifying con-



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versation. If there actually is a misunderstanding, it can be cleared up in five minutes. If there really is an issue, I can work through it with the person and we’re better off. Even if it’s an especially difficult issue, at least now it’s exposed and we’re dealing with it. That’s better than having an “elephant in the room” in our relationship.

However, in coaching hundreds of professionals and observing people in my life (including myself), it seems we have a natural resistance to pursuing clarifying conversations. It’s probably because we have this crazy need for self-protection, and this kind of conversation can feel risky. It falls into the “it’s simple, but not easy” category.

Part of overcoming this resistance is understanding how to have a clarifying conversation.

STEPS TO MASTERING THE CLARIFYING CONVERSATION

Step One: Get Clear on Your Intent

The first thing you want to do is check your own motives. For the clarifying conversation to be successful, you need to detach yourself from the conclusions you may have already formed in your mind. Remember, the purpose is to learn the other person’s perspective, so you need to be objective. Be curious to find out the other’s intent by being open to any possibility.

Step Two: Practice Your Articulation

Many struggle to have these conversations because they don’t know what to say, especially at the beginning of the exchange. We don’t want a confrontation and we also don’t want to overreact. An approach like “We need to talk,” is better than nothing, but can put the other person on the defensive from the get-go.

While there is no single best approach, I’ve found the following to be effective:

Example #1: “John, I need your help on something ... when you said, ‘(fill in the statement)’

it sounded like you might have been dissatisfied with the way I handled (name the situation). Is there something we need to discuss around this?”

Example #2: “Judy, I need your help on something ... I’ve called you several times to follow up on our last phone conversation and I haven’t heard back from you. I know you’re not the type to just ignore phone calls. Can you help me understand what’s going on here?”

The key components are to **1) ask for help** - people are usually glad to help if you ask, and **2) extend to them the benefit of the doubt** - it’s one thing to question someone’s behavior; it’s another thing to question their motives. The latter can severely damage a relationship.

Step Three: Make Sure the Environment Is Right

This conversation is very important. Therefore, make sure that the setting is private, free from interruptions and distraction, and that there is adequate time to engage in the dialogue. For example, if you approach the person to have this conversation and they have another meeting in five minutes, schedule another time with them rather than trying to squeeze the discussion in.

Warning: It can be easy to use this step as an excuse to put off these conversations. Don’t succumb to the temptation to bail out. If it’s not a good time to have the conversation, make sure you still take action to schedule it!

Step Four: Focus on Understanding

Remember to stay objective and curious during the conversation. Your job, once you’ve kicked off the conversation, is to LISTEN and SEEK UNDERSTANDING. Doing this well takes strong self-management skills. Make sure you really hear them out. Ask clarifying questions that confirm you’ve heard them right. The goal is not to prove a



point or defend yourself; it's all about clearly understanding their perspective and intent.

Step Five: Change Perceptions or Procedures

Next, you need to assess whether you need to change your perceptions or procedures. You may find out that you perceived the whole situation the wrong way, so now you can begin to look at it differently.

Perhaps when Mary ignored you in the hallway, it wasn't because she thinks you are a poor performer, but rather she had a difficult meeting to prepare for that was weighing on her mind.

Alternatively, we might change our procedures. For example, you may have felt uncomfortable that your boss went to Ben, one of your direct reports, for some information. You stewed about it for weeks and then you saw it happen again. You begin thinking that your boss doesn't view you as competent or doesn't respect your position.

You have a clarifying conversation and find out that your boss had a special project that required some quick answers from your direct report. He knew you were already involved in meeting some high-pressure deadlines, so he went directly to Ben so as not to distract you.

You feel better once you've heard the explanation. Now you and your boss work out a communication procedure to eliminate this misunderstanding in the future. From now on, he'll mention the context to you before he approaches your staff.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY

If you want more success, fulfillment and satisfying business relationships, begin utilizing clarifying conversations as a regular practice. It's easy for communication mishaps to occur. It takes leaders with courage and intentionality to clean these situations up as they occur.

I encourage you to try this for the next 30 days and then take inventory of the impact it has on the quality of your professional and personal life. How much has the quality of your professional life improved on a scale of 1 to 10?

Remember, one key conversation can make a lifetime of difference. ●

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