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Four Key Elements of Effective Business Communication

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Barbara Bulleit, Global Knowledge Instructor (Gold Club Status) MBA, PMP

Introduction

We communicate all the time, every day. Sometimes we're not even aware of it! We communicate through gestures, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice as well as through the words we speak. These variables can be joined in a variety of ways in our communication. Add to this mix: language; cultural and social differences; educational background; physical proximity; and individual fears, insecurities, strengths, and weaknesses. No wonder communication is complex! There is a huge amount of information on communication, and different methodologies for improvement. The following offers a perspective on communication that involves four key elements.

Four Key Elements

For real communication to occur, both people involved in the communication must have a clear and demonstrated understanding between them. That is, each person can repeat the main points communicated by the other person in his or her own words. To be successful in business requires this kind of effective, two-way communication. This paper focuses on effective business communication, although the information can be applied generally. To untangle the mix described above, and to improve communication, we will focus on four key elements.

- Purpose
- Style
- Listening
- Follow-up

Purpose

In business, when we communicate we usually have a purpose. Sometimes we have not considered that purpose sufficiently before beginning the dialogue. So, first we must clarify our purpose. What do we want as a result of this communication? What would be a successful outcome? To look at it from the other person's perspective, we also need to identify 'what's in it for them' or WIIFT. Examples of WIIFT include a challenging assignment, opportunity for visibility, learning new technology, career advancement, and demonstrating initiative or a willingness to assume additional responsibility.

As an example let's consider dialogue with an employee regarding a new assignment. Initially, we may look at the assignment and consider that its successful completion is the purpose. But let's break this process down into steps, with handing off the assignment being the first step. Our desired outcome FOR THE MEETING to hand off the assignment might be:

- Employee fully understands the assignment
- Responds to questions to ensure understanding

- Is able to restate or paraphrase assignment requirements
- Understands the consequences of completing or not completing the assignment
- Employee has an idea of how to proceed
- Articulates next steps
- Is aware of problems and/or issues
- Or we and employee discuss together
- Employee knows resources available and where to go for help
- We and employee agree on a follow-up status check meeting
- Employee understands WIIFT

Now we have determined that our purpose is to hand-off the assignment successfully. The analysis we completed will help us to anticipate questions and problems, prepare resources, and ensure we've matched the assignment to the most appropriate person. We can use our analysis list above as "success criteria" and actually check off each item as it is completed. Therefore, our communication with our employee leaves no doubt about what needs to be done; providing sufficient detail ensures the person has the skills, talent, experience, and resources to complete the task, knows where to go for help, will meet with us for regular updates, and knows WIIFT.

With a successful handoff of the assignment, we have begun to establish a paradigm for communication during the assignment work, including follow-ups to check status, make corrections, and to compliment upon completion. Clarity in the initial communication benefits both the employee and the manager, ensuring agreement between them regarding the desired outcome of the assignment, expectations of the manager, and how to find help and guidance through tools, resources, and status checks. A clearly identified purpose can mean the difference between success and failure. Thinking through a purpose may take time initially but will form a consistent habit of clarifying desired outcome – which usually leads to better results.

Style

Style has to do with who we are and how that style affects our communication. We may engage in dialogue with little knowledge of the impact of individual differences. Some of us may have a higher awareness of style differences but still not use it when communicating. Some of us may raise awareness when we have a problem and only then examine our communication! Let's stop for a moment and further define "style."

Style is influenced by many factors, some of which were defined at the beginning of this article. Position at work, for example, influences communication. We may email the boss in a different tone than we use with a peer or someone with a highly technical background.

A longer list of style factors might include culture, upbringing, religion, gender, age, education, language, race, politics – and this is not a total list. Some of the influences of our early years are mitigated or enhanced during our growth and development. In all, we become who we are, and who we are influences our communication. Here is a list of other factors that may affect style.

- Cultural and social differences
- Experience
- Physical proximity
- Individual fears, insecurities, strengths, and weaknesses
- Politics
- Work environment

Since style is influenced by the list above, it is helpful to determine which of those factors might be most important when dealing with a particular individual such as a remote coworker who may have a different ethnicity from our own. Some of us are aware of differences between us and individuals, such as experience, training and education, age, and position. Considering these factors before initiating communication, especially critical communication, will facilitate or detract from our ability to connect with the other person.

Let's agree that generally at work we do not sit down and tick off this list every time we communicate with someone! Then how do we overcome some of our differences in order to communicate effectively? Looking at the list above is helpful. Another way is to consider style: mine and theirs. Some of us tend to be more direct and/or assertive, or even aggressive. Some of us tend toward being indirect and/or passive. Here are some characteristics of each type.

Direct and Assertive/Aggressive	**Passive and Indirect**
"Take charge" attitude; may have aggressive tendencies	More laid-back tendency
May interrupt or tend to dominate the dialogue	May hesitate, wait to speak up, or have to be drawn out
Does not always seek dialogue; instead "tells" a lot	Lack of response does not necessarily indicate agreement or approval; has to be probed
Does not always see the other person's side; may be perceived as close-minded	Sometimes prefers for others to make decisions
May assume that passivity indicates agreement	Passive style may not indicate true feelings and attitudes
Non-verbal clues easier to detect since they are more openly expressed	Non-verbal clues follow passive characteristics and require more careful attention
Tends to decide or answer quickly	May need time rather than having to respond immediately

This simple table provides a general understanding of two basic styles. It's easy to see how communication may break down between these two types. Most of us do not easily fall into these simple categories but may have characteristics of each, which may change or vary on different days, in varying situations, and according to the work environment. All of this adds to the complexity of communications.

Therefore, we can use this table to determine if a person is direct and assertive or indirect and passive. This knowledge will promote effective communication between us. To try to break down the complexity of determining which style a person is, we can use the elements in the table to formulate helpful questions, such as the following.

- Generally, what is his attitude: take charge or laid back?
- Does she comfortably dialogue with others?
- Does he add comments and ask questions?
- Is it necessary to draw her out, to solicit her opinions?
- Does she listen to others or have a tendency to interrupt?

We can see how to use this style information to gain a better understanding of the person with whom we want to communicate. For example, if Sally's style is to be assertive or aggressive, she might have to work hard to hold back some of that take-charge mentality and her tendency to speak up, dominate, and not read non-verbal clues. In a situation with Sally, it would be most helpful to be direct while also trying to find commonality, such as a shared goal or desired outcome. Finding common ground is extremely important in order to avoid potential conflict. If we are clear about our purpose, we need to learn about Sally's purpose which involves listening, covered in our next chapter.

On the other hand, if Sally's style is passive and indirect, she might have to make more of an effort to participate in a discussion, to voice her opinions or misgivings, and to ask questions. In communicating with passive, indirect Sally, we need to use a quieter tone while being very clear about purpose. Clarifying purpose, listening, and following up while dealing with style increases the likelihood of employees meeting our expectations more completely.

It's easy to see how we can use this same information to gain more insight about our own style. After all, it takes at least two people to communicate, and we are part of that formula. So, we have to apply these questions to ourselves as well.

- Am I more aggressive or laid back?
- Do I ask questions of others?
- Is my tendency to accept in the moment then voice my opinions later?
- Do I consider other people's opinions, do I ignore their input, or just withdraw?

Once we've determined our style and the style of the other person, we have to consider the dynamic of the two. Two aggressive people each may have to work harder at allowing the other to talk and voice opinions. Two passive people may tend to come to conclusions too quickly, or may not uncover issues or differences. One of each will have to be very aware of the other's differences and make the effort required to accommodate those differences. Taking the time to think about our own style, then to consider the style of the other person, generates huge returns in communication. These returns include:

- Increased ability of the passive/indirect person to express
- Increased ability of the aggressive/direct person to listen
- Ability to allow and work out differences
- Realizing that we each offer strengths as well as weaknesses
- Achieving more together than possible as individuals

Recognizing style or characteristics of ourselves and others, then adjusting to each other's style to facilitate communication, is key to successful business communications.

Listening

We all listen – or think we do. There is a real difference between listing and "active" listening. Active listening takes energy; it's work. To actively listen to someone means the following:

- Focus eyes and mind on the person speaking
- Indicate listening through eye contact, note-taking, body language
- Respond appropriately with comments, questions, or paraphrasing

The first step is the most difficult: focusing solely on the person speaking versus thinking of what we want to say next, or beginning to analyze, or even coming up with a solution! Quelling tendencies to analyze, problem solve, etc. means we have to WORK hard. It takes a strong effort to halt or slow down those tendencies. If we don't stop them, then our focus is not on the person but is on developing our own responses.

Most of us have never learned about listening. We think we're listening, even as we start wondering about how to solve the problem – before we have all of the information the person is trying to give us; while we're developing the solution, we miss a critical piece of the picture. No wonder that sometimes when we voice "the solution" the person looks at us with wonder. The solution doesn't come close to meeting requirements. With this in mind, we realize that part of listening is waiting to get all of the information – the facts – before responding.

When we do not fully listen to the person speaking, we are not getting all of the information they are telling us. We are not getting what we pay them to do. Short-circuiting active listening means we short-circuit them and ourselves. When this does happen and we're aware of it, we can stop the person and ask him or her to repeat what they said. Something like, "Would you please repeat that so I have a full understanding?" is very appropriate.

Looking into the eyes of the speaker is a good way to focus on listening. When we make eye contact with that person, we accomplish several things. First, we are giving the person a signal that we are paying attention; we are listening. Second, looking into the eyes of the speaker pulls us into what the speaker is saying. As we become more involved in what the person is saying, it becomes easier to listen versus thinking about how we will respond.

Making eye contact with a person may depend upon style or culture. Some cultures prefer not to have direct eye contact. Our style assessment will help us to determine whether or not that is true for the person with whom we are dealing as well as for ourselves. Our assessment will also help us to determine which other mechanisms to use to indicate we are truly focused on what the person is saying.

After listening to the speaker, our response may take several forms.

- Questioning to clarify some points
- Repeating words or phrases in our own words to verify understanding
- Summarizing to make sure we have understood the main points and have a complete and accurate picture

Responding appropriately is a real indication of active listening. When we talk with teenagers, we might ask them to repeat what we just said. If they repeat verbatim, we know they heard us and can "parrot." If they paraphrase or explain what we said in their own words, we know they really listened and understood. The ability to paraphrase is a powerful tool to use with our employees. If we have any doubt of their understanding, having them paraphrase is a good way to check it out.

Another appropriate response is to ask questions. If we are listening to the person, asking appropriate questions helps that person to know we are really listening. It works the other way as well. If an employee does not ask us questions or does not respond appropriately, we know we need to review again, repeat using different words, draw a diagram, or whatever else we need to do to help that person understand.

After delegating a task to a project team member we may ask the person to summarize. We want to make sure they understand what we've said, have captured the main points, and will follow through on what we actually said versus what they think we said. Imagine the difference this clarification can make.

Active listening is not something we need to do all the time; in fact, we could not. What's important is to determine when to use active listening. A good measurement is to say that we should actively listen anytime not listening could result in damaging or hurtful consequences, that is, the impact could be high.

We can see that to be able to accomplish these three tasks with the speaker will require focus. And as we've already said, making good eye contact with the person speaking can help. To accurately capture what is being said and to not miss key points, we may also take notes. However, note-taking should not take us totally away from making good eye contact with the speaker. Using a combination of note-taking, eye contact, asking questions, repeating what the speaker has said in our own words, and summarizing the main points all will help us to listen better because we will be more involved with the speaker.

Follow-Up

When we communicate with someone, we have a purpose which likely falls into one of these categories:

- Complete a task
- Get a commitment
- Make a decision
- Solve a problem

Our initial communication with others may achieve the handoff to get the work done. However, the initial communication is not all that's necessary. How many times after the initial communication have we found that the commitment is not carried through, the decision is not upheld, or the solution is not implemented? To make sure the other person or persons is/are committed and will follow through on that commitment or agreement, we have to follow-up. What does that mean? Let's look at an example.

In the first section on purpose, we discussed handing off an assignment to an employee. The assignment is to create user documentation for a new software product we are launching. It needs to be completed prior to launch, which means there are several reviews, edits, and a final check. Our handoff meeting was clear about what was required, when the final document was due, defined reviewers and their responsibilities, and set quality goals. In other words, we have been specific; measurements are built into the assignment; the employee has the skills, tools, and resources to do the job; the timeframe is clear; and the assignment overall is achievable.

Let's assume this employee creates very fine documentation but is not good at meeting deadlines. Follow-up becomes critical to keep the employee on target. As manager, we will ensure that our follow-up meetings are regular, requiring an update on progress and clarifying the next target and follow-up meeting. We are using our follow-up meetings to help the employee stay on target and more effectively meet expectations. WIIFT in this regard is that the employee misses fewer deadlines, enhances his/her reputation and performance, and hopefully begins to internalize the value of meeting commitments.

Suppose the employee is good at meeting deadlines but is not good at receiving or using input from reviewers. In this case, we might schedule our follow-up meetings to coincide with review dates. In these meetings, we might ask about input, what was helpful, what was not and why – without getting into details – and engage the employee in a dialogue. The desired outcome of the meeting is to increase the employee's cognizance of our awareness of the review/input/edit cycle and its value in producing higher quality user documentation. For this employee the WIIFT is an increased ability to receive constructive feedback.

Employees who regularly miss assignments, are late, perform poorly, or show other symptoms of not being fully involved in or committed to their work present a different set of problems. With these employees the first step is to find out what's going on. That means we have to ensure that we have been clear in our direction, expectations, and in the handoff, as detailed in the section on Purpose. If not, that's a good place to start. If we have been clear and if there are no outstanding issues such as health, family, or other issues that need to be considered, it's time to have a follow-up meeting similar to that with junior or less-qualified employees. If the behavior continues, it may be necessary to include consequences if our expectations are not met.

In each of the follow-up meetings identified above, we revert again to: purpose, listening, and style. If we are always clear about purpose or desired outcome, if we listen to our employees including those "between the lines" hints, and if we match style-to-style as much as possible, our follow-up meetings will be highly productive. And they don't have to be long – only as long as needed and no more.

Lack of follow-up can have significant consequences. When employees determine there will be no or minimal follow-up, they make choices. Some employees are so diligent that lack of follow-up has little impact on performance, but over time, even the performance of dedicated employees may suffer without follow-up and feedback. We all need feedback.

For less diligent employees, however, lack of follow-up can mean that work does not meet expectations or is not completed. We are all aware of the impact of missed deadlines and poor quality. This impact can be reduced and managed with regular status reviews. This does not mean we have to have weekly one-hour meetings with all employees! It does mean that we understand our employees and their abilities and attitudes, that we are clear about what has been delegated to whom and consequences of completing or not completing assignments, and that we have meetings with each one dependent upon these elements.

For instance, a new or inexperienced employee might require more frequent follow-up sessions to keep them on track, to answer questions, and to help them solve problems. These meetings might take 10 to 15 minutes. A more senior employee who is on familiar turf will only need initial direction and occasional meetings, primarily for the purpose of sharing information and for us to praise. Remember: we all like feedback!

Summary

Behind our communication is a purpose. That purpose may be assigning a new task, asking an employee to solve a problem, or providing feedback on performance. A significant part of purpose is to ensure that employees understand "what's in it for them," or WIIFT.

Our next step is to understand style: that of the employee and our own, which helps us to modify our own style and better understand how to work with the employee's style. As we talk with the employee we can use active listening to ensure that we are getting complete information, and to ensure the employee is listening to us. Once we have clarified expectations and handed off an assignment, we must follow-up.

The employee should know about the follow-up; we discuss it as part of our initial handoff conversation and set the first follow-up meeting. In the follow-up meeting we communicate with each other to ensure the employee is on the right track to meet expectations, has everything needed to complete the assignment, receives positive and constructive feedback, and problem-solving as required. During our follow-up meeting, we will check on purpose, listen carefully, and use our knowledge of our style and the employee's style to help us talk with each other.

The next time we are ready to communicate let's make sure we do the following:

- Clarify purpose , what we want as a result of the communication
- Consider style, theirs and ours, to facilitate effective communications
- Make a conscious effort to listen actively
- Follow-up to ensure we and the employee have communicated effectively and the employee is on track to meet expectations

Clarity of purpose, identifying style, active listening, and follow-up meetings are tools to increase the value of our communication. As we communicate more effectively with our employees, we are also exposing them to more effective communication. And they will communicate more effectively with others. And the cycle goes on.

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About the Author

Barbara Bulleit spent 25 years in corporate America in varying management and individual contributor roles including consulting, product development, marketing, and project management. She regularly delivers training for Global Knowledge across the US in Professional Skills, and Project Management. Her expertise has been recognized by Global Knowledge through initiation into the first group of the Instructor Gold Club.