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Ten Principles of Communication

Strengthening one of your most important business skills.

The ability to communicate well is your most valuable personal and business skill. Yet, it can often be difficult. This article breaks down the communication process into 10 principles to help you understand how each of them affects your success.

1. Trust precedes open, clear communication.

Trust is the foundation that must be built before communication begins. Trust means placing confidence in someone because you believe in his or her integrity. If you don't believe in someone's integrity, you will have a hard time believing what he or she is saying.

2. Everyone has a unique filtering system.

Everything you hear passes through your personal filtering system, which is made up of your needs, values, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and experiences. Many factors block our filters, such as prejudices, lack of interest, envy, jealousy, anger, revenge, hatred and the need to be right. Don't prejudge situations or people; form your opinion in the moment instead. "Cleaning" out your filter periodically will help reduce conflict, improve communication and strengthen your relationships.

3. Listening is the most important human relations skill.

Follow these tips to become a better listener:

- Control your urge to speak.
- Be receptive. Be objective and willing to hear what someone else has to say.
- Empathize. Listen to what people are actually saying, not what you think they should be saying.
- Take notes. In meetings and workshops, write down what people are saying to make sure you capture the right words.
- Eliminate distractions. While on the phone or talking to an employee, don't read materials on your desk, daydream or think about what is going on outside your window. Consider a neutral meeting area such as a conference room rather than your office.

4. Image speaks long before you open your mouth.

People decide 10 things about you within 10 seconds of meeting you. Their decision is based on your image, which is a combination of your appearance and behavior. Your

appearance reveals several key things about you including self-respect, confidence, organizational skills and soundness of judgment. Emphasize the importance of sharp dressing and good grooming to your staff. A confident, professional image is essential, especially for those staff members who represent your organization publicly.

Your posture, handshakes, eye contact and facial expressions also speak volumes about you. Maintain good posture and command respect by standing tall and planting your feet about six to eight inches apart with one foot slightly in front of the other. Make and keep eye contact. Continue to look someone in the eye about 80 to 90 percent of the time. Less than that can be interpreted as discomfort, evasiveness, lack of confidence or boredom; more than that can be construed as being too direct, dominant or forceful and can make the other person uncomfortable.

5. Face-to-face is the most powerful, effective form.

Because you can see how people are dressed and groomed and observe their body language, face-to-face communication is far more reliable than communicating through e-mail, particularly if this is the first time you are meeting someone. Learn to assess what people are saying nonverbally through their image so you can ascertain if it is congruent with their words. Make sure your messages are congruent as well.

6. People's natural styles can naturally cause conflict.

Each of us has a unique behavioral

style, and people naturally want to be communicated with to their style. There are four different behavior styles, according to the DiSC® model of behavior.

People with dominant behavioral styles are risk takers who like bottom-line results. Communicate with them by giving them brief, direct answers. People with the influencer style of behavior are “people people” who make wonderful networkers. Give them the opportunity to be in the spotlight, but keep them to a schedule and be ready to interrupt, if necessary, if you want to say something as well. Those who have the steadiness behavioral style are calm, pleasant and amicable. They dislike conflict. Ask them open-ended questions and try to keep them out of the spotlight. Individuals who have conscientiousness tendencies are analytical people who think logically, not emotionally. Prepare your case in advance and be ready to present pros and cons and as much data as you can.

7. Feedback is necessary.

Until you receive feedback from those with whom you’re communicating, you don’t know that people have heard and understood what you’re saying. Verbal feedback includes words, phrases, sounds (such as hmm) or even a dialogue initiated by the person or persons with whom you are communicating. Nonverbal feedback includes head shaking, frowning, smiling, folding arms across one’s chest and looking down or away. Pay attention to this feedback to make sure your message is being heard and understood.

8. Distractions complicate the process.

Distractions can be internal or external. Internal distractions can include illness, personal worries and anxieties and tension between yourself and the person with whom you’re talking. External distractions include phone calls, people stopping by your office and looking out the window, especially on a beautiful day.

To tune out external distractions, turn your back to your computer if you have people in your office for a meeting. Don’t pick up the phone when it rings, and put away any work that’s on your desk. To tune out internal distractions, try to leave your tensions and worries at home. Do your best to separate your personal and your professional life.

9. People give meaning to words.

Words themselves have no meaning; people give them meaning. For example, the word “discrimination” may invoke a different emotional response from women and minorities who have experienced it in the workplace. Make a list of words you use in business that might be interpreted differently or be offensive to employees or other business associates. Then stop using those words. You also have the right to let others know when they use words that offend you.

10. More people mean more possibilities for misunderstanding.

We often don’t hear something exactly the way it was told to us. Multiply that by the number of people involved in conversations, meetings and conferences, and we increase the chances to have incomplete or wrong information passed on to others, who in turn

may pass it on. It’s like the telephone game you played as a child—the message the first child in line whispered in the second child’s ear often bore little resemblance to the message whispered to the last child, and it had increasingly less resemblance the more children were added to the line. State your points clearly. Before a meeting ends, ask participants for feedback or to summarize what you have said (or, give a summary yourself). As a speaker, present your points logically and use visuals and stories to reinforce your points. ▲

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