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ProSeminar Top Tips Series

Improving Communications

One of the keys to improving communication is to recognise why it sometimes goes wrong and then using that awareness to avoid the pitfalls. Here are some of the common problems with tips on how to overcome them.

1. Things get forgotten

We simply forget to tell somebody something important, perhaps because we're under stress with lots of other things to do.

Tip

Make proper use of jobs-to-do lists. When you recognise that you've got to tell someone something, put it on your list. Even if you intend to do it immediately, you might not get through and, unless it's on the list, it may then get forgotten.

2. Assumptions

Many of our communication problems arise from assumptions.

- We assume other parties already know, don't need to know, or that someone else will tell them.
- We assume we know everything because if there was something important for us to know, someone would have told us.

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- We fail to read a document properly because we assume we already know what it's going to say

Tips

- Put yourself in the other person's shoes and think about what they need to know and make sure you cover it.
- Think through your own information needs and what additional questions you might ask. What could you be missing?
- Read documents the whole way through.

2. Awkwardness

Sometimes communication breakdown because we feel awkward about a situation or relationship and avoid communicating about it or with the other party.

Tip

Recognise you're feeling uncomfortable and face up to the task. Go and see the person or at least pick up the phone and speak to them directly - don't be an 'e-mail coward'.

3. Too Much Communication

Faced with a plethora of e-mails, a series of long, and largely unnecessary, meetings, or a deluge of detail, it's not surprising if people switch off.

Tips

- Be selective in your communication – don't copy everyone in on everything just to cover your back and certainly not just to impress them with how hard you're working
- Try to keep to the point, - don't over-elaborate with unnecessary detail.
- Cut out unnecessary meetings and review the frequency of regular meetings – could they be scheduled every fortnight rather than every week?

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4. Jargon and Abbreviations

Many of us have the habit of using technical jargon and abbreviations without considering if the person with whom we are talking is likely to understand them. For instance, TLA's (Three Letter Abbreviations) provide a convenient shorthand, but they can also create mystification and confusion.

Tips

- Adjust your choice of words and abbreviations to your audience – particularly if they are from a different function or organisation. Check out if the other parties are familiar with your abbreviations.
- If you don't understand a word or abbreviation, have the courage to admit it and ask for clarification. Don't rely on the hope that you'll be able to work it out from context as the conversation continues.

5. Long-winded sentences and poorly structured arguments

Sometimes our expositions can be difficult to follow and the direction of our argument unclear. Our sentences may be disjointed and contain many asides before we finally get to the point. (Psychologists refer to these as 'garden path sentences' as when the listener is at the beginning they have no idea where it might lead them around various twists and turns.)

Tip

Make your point and then elaborate. Paint the big picture and then fill in the details.

6. Straying and Irrelevance

It's all too easy to get distracted and wander off of the point - quick-thinking intelligent minds may be particularly prone to going off at a tangent.

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Tips

- Think clearly about what you want to say, and the particular objectives you have, in advance of the conversation or meeting and keep these in mind throughout.
- Don't let yourself get distracted and employ appropriate techniques to pull the conversation back on course: *'Now, the point we were discussing was....'* or *'Now, let's get back to the main point of the discussion'* or *'Okay where were we? What we need to decide is how we're going to...'*
- Summarise to maintain structure and control. *'Let me just summarise the points we've covered so far.'*
- Ensure action points are explicit – who is to do what by when.

7. Ambiguity

Ambiguity provides scope for another party to interpret our message in a way other than we intended.

Sometimes this results from the way pronouns are used so that, for instance, it's unclear as to what the 'he' or 'it' in a sentence refers to. *'Mark and the waiter argued for a long time about the food. In the end he was so annoyed that he left.'* We might mean that it was Mark that got annoyed and left, but the listener might think it was the waiter.

Sometimes it results from using vague phrases such as *'as soon as possible'* or phrases which could have different meanings in different contexts. Take, for instance, the UK-based businessman promising to get something to a Saudi-based colleague by the beginning of next week. For the UK-based businessman this may mean on Monday but the Saudi-based colleague might assume this means on Saturday when his working week begins.

Tips

- Anticipate and pre-empt ambiguity. Think about how else what you are saying or writing could be interpreted.
- Ask yourself what the pronoun could refer back to. Is it clear from the context or could it be taken as referring to something else?

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- Be specific with dates and times. Don't say *'I'll get this to you by Thursday'*, say *'I'll get this to you by 14.00 on Thursday, 1 September'*. (State the time zone if relevant.)

8. Audibility Difficulties

When it's difficult to hear not only is it difficult to understand, it can also lead to irritability and tension.

Tips

- Don't battle against the sound of building work or other intrusive noises – you'll be better off abandoning the discussion and reconvening later.
- Be careful that irritation caused by noise or difficulties in hearing, doesn't make you irritated with the other party. Remember this point particularly when you've got a poor telephone line.
- Project your voice at the right level for the room you're using and the distance people are away from you.
- Be sensitive to those with hearing impediments. Look in their direction so they can see your face and lips.

9. Hidden Messages and Inferences

An important part of a message is often hidden. That is to say the speaker expects the listener to infer something from the tone or phrasing which is not made explicit in the words.

Some people adopt a 'direct style' - saying what they mean. Others may adopt an 'indirect style' - expecting the listener to infer the message for themselves. The indirect style is often thought of as being more 'diplomatic', while the direct style may be considered blunt. However, the 'diplomatic' approach may mean the listener fails to pick up the intended subtle inference.

Tips

- Listen out for hints and check them out
- Don't let diplomacy submerge your intended message

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- Don't over react to people who talk in a blunt way – it's probably just their style or culture.

10. Tone of Voice

A message isn't merely in the words - it's also in the tone. Sometimes our tone may indicate an emotion, such as irritation or hostility, that we don't really want to communicate lest it lead to a cycle of reactions and get in the way of achieving our rational objective.

Tips

- Be aware of your tone of voice. Control your emotions and don't overreact to others' tone.
- Pick up on others' tone and explore what lies behind it - *'You don't seem very keen on this? Is there a problem we haven't looked at?'*
- Re-read e-mails message before sending. Ask yourself: *'How might the recipient read this – would they interpret this with the tone I intend?' 'As I read this to myself, am I investing it with a warmth which isn't really there?'*

11. Body Language and Gestures

Body language and gestures may carry a message contrary to the words being spoken. A colleague may say *'Yes, Okay I'll do that'*, but if his facial expression is glum, his eyes downcast and his arms and legs are tightly crossed, it may be an indication that he's unhappy about doing what required.

Tips

- Look for signals in the other party's body language. If the body language contradicts the spoken words, pick up the signal and check out understanding and commitment.
- When others adopt defensive body language, don't react by adopting the same yourself. Respond to tight defensive gestures with open ones.
- Use your facial expression to show that you are listening and taken an interest in what the other person is saying – look pleased, concerned, puzzled or outraged as may be appropriate. It's difficult to communicate with someone who adopts a deadpan expression.

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12. Too Many Links in the Communication Chain

'Send reinforcements. We're going to advance'. 'Send three and four pence. We're going to a dance'. This is the classic illustration of what is known as 'Chinese whispers'. As information is passed on, so it gets changed. We filter out things we don't understand, or which don't fit with our interest. Words get changed. Details get forgotten. People may think they remember what someone has said to them, but often they are wrong. What they remember is what they understood and inferred.

Tips

- Cut down links in the communication chain. Where possible let people hear it 'from the horse's mouth'.
- Take a colleague with you to crucial briefings so that you can compare notes afterwards and clarify what was actually said before passing the message on to others.
- Don't be surprised when you hear something you've said misreported once it's been passed down the chain.

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