

PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH QUALITY COMMUNICATION

by Lawrence M. Kohn

We know that productivity is the pathway to profits. And in this high-tech world, it's fashionable to look to technology for solutions to productivity problems. But, before you invest in any new-fangled frills, don't forget to focus on some old-fashioned skills.

Quality communication is the foundation of productivity. It has the short-term benefit of getting work done efficiently. Plus, it offers some important, long-term benefits. It creates client satisfaction, motivates marketing, supports self-esteem, maximizes morale and reinvigorates respect for others.

This article will help you increase productivity by increasing the quality of communication in your organization. It will help you become aware of danger zones and what you can do to avoid them. It will give you tips you can use right away. And, if you make a commitment to quality communication and teach these tips to everyone in your organization, you will create a quality communication culture. When you do, not only will it help you increase profits, but also, it will make the work experience more meaningful and more fun.

Quality communication has three components: 1. It's clear. 2. It's constructive; and, 3. It's consistent. Let's take a look at each component.

CLEAR

The workplace is filled with unclear communication. The result is that people get confused. People waste time trying to figure out how to start a task. And, once they get started, they waste time doing things incorrectly. The strategy for enhancing clarity is to help people think before they communicate.

Danger Zone: Unclear Needs

It is impossible to communicate clearly if you don't know exactly what you need. I was working with a firm that seemed in constant crisis. Everyone believed that the problem was just the, "nature of the profession." A brief discussion revealed that the partners were not given advance notice of client-related, impending deadlines. Obviously, partners need to anticipate deadlines. Once the specific need was identified, the solution was simple. The managers now regularly review each client with the partner-in-charge and point out upcoming deadlines well in advance.

Tip: Be clear about your needs.

Danger Zone: Unclear directions

Highly educated, smart people still may not know how to give clear directions. I once overheard a CPA who wanted to teach his secretary how to be more thorough. He said to her, "Include all of the documents that are required and don't include any the documents that are not required." Needless to say, the secretary was still in the dark about which documents were or were not required. Clear directions should include specific, detailed lists.

Tip: Prepare detailed lists to ensure clear directions.

Danger Zone: Insufficient questions

People often feel uncomfortable about asking questions. Delegates may be embarrassed for not knowing something they think they are expected to understand. Delegators who tease, reprimand or act impatient exacerbate the problem. Environments that do not welcome questions invite mistakes. Make it a policy in your firm to promote questions. Instead of asking, "Do you have any questions?" delegators should ask, "What are your questions?"

Tip: Promote questions.

Danger Zone: Taking the wrong path

Even with clear directions and lots of questions, some people may move in the wrong direction. Instead of waiting until it's too late, it's a good idea to always arrange a brief follow-up meeting to review the delegatee's understanding of a task. The interval between the initial meeting and the follow-up should provide enough time for the delegatee to think about the task. At the review meeting, it is important for the delegator to listen and let the delegatee explain their understanding.

Tip: Implement reconnaissance after delegation.

Danger Zone: Unclear quality standards

It is so common for people to have difficulty describing the quality standards they want to apply to a task. Phrases such as, "A professional look," or words like, "thorough" or "well-written" may seem descriptive, but in fact have minimal meaning. Quality standards must be explicit i.e. "No type-o's" or "All names spelled correctly." When quality standards are clear, the finished product will meet the standards.

Tip: Document quality standards.

Danger Zone: Unclear Deadlines

One of the most frustrating obstacles to productivity is failure for delegates to meet deadlines. Fortunately, it is one of the easiest problems to avoid. The solution is to always negotiate a specific deadline for each task. Be careful to avoid unclear deadlines such as, "ASAP" or, "When you get a chance." These phrases are recipes for disaster.

Tip: Negotiate deadlines for all tasks.

Danger Zone: Denial

Many people fail to accept responsibility for making their point clearly. They wrongly believe that they have the skills to communicate and that the failure to understand is with the other person. They want to shift the burden of learning to the student. I remember hearing a CPA having difficulty explaining a calculation to a subordinate. After a brief discussion, he complained, "You just don't get what I'm saying." The reality is that the CPA was in denial about his inability to be clear. In that situation, people should identify the confusion and keep trying to

turn on the light bulb. If any comment is necessary, it could be "I'm not doing a good enough job of explaining this to you. Can you tell me how I could be more clear?"

Tip: Take responsibility for being understood.

Danger Zone: Pointless conversation

People love to hear themselves talk and often incorrectly believe they have highly developed communication skills. So much time is wasted by the delivery of irrelevant information. Also, people who abuse their listeners lose their respect and reduce their willingness for future interaction. For the solution, we can look to how this problem is often solved in meetings: an agenda. Agendas are lists of topics to be covered. If someone in your organization has difficulty staying focused on the important issues of a conversation, consider asking them to create a brief list (written or memorized) of the issues they want to address. You can take it a step further and also ask them to identify the impact of each issue. The impact is the expected result. Identifying the impact of an issue helps identify its relevance.

Tip: Consider "key issues" lists and their impact.

CONSTRUCTIVE

Constructive communication is motivational and invites further interaction. Unfortunately, many people deliver unnecessarily negative messages. People who receive negative messages inevitably produce less. Some negativity could steal an hour of productivity. Other negative interactions could waste days or weeks. Negativity can mushroom to involve many other people in an organization, which reduces their productivity as well. Worst of all, it can result in litigation, which may be the greatest time-waster of all. People need to notice when they are negative and only then can they begin to do something about it.

Danger Zone: Cruelty

Cruel people often justify their cruelty by calling it honesty. They like to, "Tell it like it is." This is not to say that it is not appropriate to deliver critical messages. The issue is how to do it. The answer is to focus on the problem and not the person, i.e., "The work is not getting done." vs. "Your work product is embarrassingly inadequate."

Tip: Focus on the problem--not the person.

Danger Zone: Hovering

A regular complaint is that someone's boss is overly aggressive about the status of a task. This makes people nervous and self-conscious. Instead of accelerating productivity, it increases mistakes and reduces clear thinking. The solution is to shift the responsibility of follow-up to the delegatee. When a task is identified, it is always necessary to arrange for an update. If the delegator is anxious, negotiate a rapid interval. Once the appropriate reporting mechanism is in place, hovering will disappear.

Tip: Negotiate appropriate updating schedules.

Danger Zone: Impatience

Impatience happens when expectations aren't met. Impatient employees complain that their delegates, "Should know how to do their jobs by now!" While it may be true that other people are not up to speed, impatience does not provide a solution. Training provides the solution. Impatient delegators should recognize their impatience as an indication that training is needed.

Tip: Recognize impatience as a need for training.

Danger Zone: Blame

It is so common to hear senior employees complain that, "People don't care today as much as we did." They blame others for being lax or lazy or unmotivated. The reality is that people today are just as capable of being motivated as ever before. The weakness is not in the person; it's in the failure to motivate. Motivation requires two ingredients: 1. A perception of benefit. People need to feel that the task will be valuable to the organization and ultimately to them. 2. Achievable steps. If people have the tools and the skills to get a job done, they will have confidence in their ability to be successful. That's motivational.

Tip: Create desirable goals and achievable steps.

Danger Zone: Public humiliation

One of the most debilitating and time-wasting experiences is to criticize an employee in the presence of others. Once I heard someone stand in front of his office and yell, "I'd like to find someone around here who knows something about grammar!" The secretary who made the error was completely embarrassed. She quickly repaired the mistake but was unproductive for days. Unfortunately, the public humiliation continued and the secretary began a conscious effort to undermine the success of her boss. In addition to reducing her own productivity, she did her best to turn other employees against him. The whole experience wasted hundreds of hours.

Tip: Deliver all negative evaluations in private.

Danger Zone: Angry behavior

In some environments, it seems acceptable to allow people to yell and swear at others. This is often the case with authority figures. The fact is that this kind of childish behavior is absolutely unacceptable. The reduced productivity issues abound. When people witness angry behavior, they feel threatened. They question the emotional stability of the perpetrator. Then, they invest time in anxiety rather than productivity. Left unchecked, anger can erupt into litigation or even violence. When people yell and display uncontrolled anger, they must immediately receive professional counseling and be put on notice that failure to control themselves will result in termination.

Tip: Ban angry behavior.

Danger Zone: Sarcasm

I have implemented hundreds of informal surveys regarding the impact of sarcasm on productivity. It may be surprising for those who enjoy sarcastic interaction that the majority of the business professionals I've interviewed are offended by even playful sarcasm when it is directed toward them. It is true that some business cultures invite sarcasm. Others almost require it. Nevertheless, the fact is that, "Many a truth is said in jest." The risk is great that sarcasm will be received as an insult and can reduce loyalty, self-esteem, team spirit and ultimately, productivity. Unfortunately, a sarcastic culture will often promote negative discussions about customers. This hostility actually can reduce the quality of customer service. If you really want to continue sarcastic interaction, it's a good idea to ask everyone involved how they react to it.

Tip: Make sure sarcasm is welcome.

Danger Zone: Internal junk E-mail

One of the most aggravating ways to waste time is to read irrelevant E-mail from other people in your firm. It's more annoying than spam from strangers because there is a certain responsibility to read e-mail from your co-workers. People should refrain from sending jokes, gossip or any other non-work-related information unless invited to do so. Even then, it should be clearly labeled.

Tip: Ban (or label) internal junk e-mail.

CONSISTENT

Quality communication is not intermittent. It is woven into the fabric of a firm. It is the normal mode of communication. When clear and constructive communication is consistent, the right information is transmitted to the right people on a timely basis.

Danger Zone: Ignoring poor communication

To improve communication, people need to know that it is acceptable to point out and discuss weak communication. This is particularly difficult when someone with seniority is the offender. The solution begins at the top. Top management must announce a willingness to be reminded of their communication errors. Then, everyone needs to learn how to initiate the dialogue. One way to bring up the subject is to ask for permission. One could ask, "May I bring up a communication issue?" If the importance of quality communication is properly installed in the culture of a firm, most weak communicators will be interested in learning how to improve.

Tip: Encourage discussions about communication.

Danger Zone: Exclusion

We've all suffered in situations in which someone was left out of the loop. Consider the manager who discovers a problem and fixes it but fails to tell the partner. Then, the partner sees the client unexpectedly and is surprised to learn about the incident when she hears it from the client. The solution is to create a list of people who should consistently be updated about a project. Place that list on the cover of the file. Make it a habit to review the list every time an entry is made in the file to determine who should stay in the loop.

Tip: Create "Loop Lists."

Danger Zone: Inconsistent Structure

Internal memos and e-mail should be crafted for quick review. If everyone learns how to be consistent in the format, the process becomes more productive. A reasonable structure is to format e-mail and hard-copy memos with consistent categories such as: subject; impact; recommended action. Details should be listed in order of importance.

Tip: Teach consistent E-mail and memo structure.

CONCLUSION

Everyone benefits from quality communication. Even though learning how to communicate effectively may take some time, the end result will dramatically increase productivity. And, since technology has increased the quantity of communication, the quality becomes all the more important. Hopefully, the tips in this article will help create a quality communication consciousness in your firm.

If you really want to improve communication, make a commitment to it. Create a culture that supports communication. Teach communication skills. Try to help everyone recognize danger zones. Let people know that it is appropriate to discuss danger zones and spend time talking about how to avoid them. Compliment quality communication. Compensate for quality communication. And then, enjoy the productivity.