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A formula of effective communication

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Why are certain persons more successful than others in their personal lives and in their professional environment? Some are perhaps very successful at their homes, having good relationships with their spouses and children, but having many communication problems in their office: problems with bosses, but good relationships with co-workers or vice versa, good relationship with the bosses, but conflicts with other managers and subordinates. Others again are having good relationships at the office at the expense of their marriages and family life: too much time is being spent at the office and the family at home is being felt ignored and left behind. The root cause of the problem is communication or to be more exact: effective communication. It is actually surprising that a lot of communication is going well most of the time. However, if a communication problem happens, the question: what went wrong? Usually remains an unanswered question. There are plenty of books, articles and websites dedicated to the problems of communication. Some give scientific evidence of communication barriers and obstacles, but leave finding practical solutions to the reader. More practically oriented recipes are difficult to implement due to lack of time and practice. For example the trait assertiveness: it has become common knowledge that it is important to be assertive in daily life. But how can one be assertive if he or she is introvert by nature? On top of personality (extrovert versus introvert), there is the issue of culture: people from certain countries are simply less extrovert than from other countries.

Wouldn't it be extremely useful to have a simple formula of effective communication which can be used in all circumstances? I think the following formula would be helpful:

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION=
SELF-INTEREST + INTEREST OF OTHERS – DISTURBING FACTORS
OR

$EC = SI + IO - DF$

Let's look at the three elements of this formula.

SELF-INTEREST

When people communicate, self interest is probably the main reason for communication. One is far more interested in his or her own interest than in the interests of others. The above formula can actually be simplified even further by simply stating that communication is equal to self-interest. For this reason, communication is rarely effective because one is not trying to find a common ground in interaction processes but merely seeking a way to fulfill certain short-term interests. The most important problem in communication is probably asymmetry. The two parties in question are having different agendas and different interests which is further complicated by asymmetries of, knowledge, power and authority. For this reason, negotiation skills and tactics have become a very important trait of modern civilization. In the old days, physical strength was the determining factor to force the other party to compromise. Thanks to civilization, consensus can now be reached by communication. This civilizing process is basically a shift from a "command and control" communication culture to a "negotiating and persuasion" culture.

This shift has resulted in a greater emphasis on the ability to effectively communicate verbally and non-verbally with each other. This also implies better education in which development of dialogue skills has become the backbone of modern education. One is at a young age already required to be able to express their thoughts clearly in class presentations, essays, reports and not to mention in theses of various sorts in tertiary educational settings.

INTEREST OF OTHERS

The interest of others has probably been the most important issue in many textbooks about effective communication. The ability to listen, to get and give feedback, to control anger ("anger management"), conflict resolution, stress management, etc., have been discussed in great lengths by many authors, scholars, management trainers, etc.

The problem is accommodating the interests of others have become more important with the introduction of information technology and the ability to trade goods and services in cyberspace. True globalization has probably already occurred in cyberspace where a global 24 hour economy has been created where everybody is exchanging goods, services and information all over the world.

Everybody has become a customer! It is important to look at the needs of others as your customer. This marketing concept was first used in transactional settings, but was introduced in learning organizations and now has become an important concept in all corners of life.

The issue of discovering the interests of others has even been infiltrated by non-scientific 'tools' like astrology, numerology and tarot cards. Before the discovery of these tools, one was still utilizing (and still is utilizing) many scientific tools offered by psychologists ranging from psychoanalysis, conversation analysis, transactional analysis and the sort resulting in various therapies which might be effective depending on the willingness of the buyer to take it seriously or not.

How can one discover the interests of others? This requires a proactive approach from both parties. Two strategies might be helpful. The first strategy is called the PAIR approval strategy: Placate (listen, empathize, respond with concern); Attend (to the other); Investigate (circumstances details of issue); Resolve (decide on action to take). The second strategy is called the five-step method: listen, respond, decide on action, take action and follow up.

DISTURBING FACTORS

The third element of effective communication is probably the most difficult one: how to eliminate disturbing factors or how to overcome communication barriers. There are basically six types of barriers between people communicating with each other: differences in perception, incorrect filtering, language problems, poor listening, differing emotional states, and differing backgrounds. In order to overcome these barriers, one must be willing to avoid selective perception, condense messages to the bare essentials, use specific and accurate words possible, always verify your interpretation of what's been said, be aware of the feelings that arise in yourself and in others as you communicate, and attempt to control them.

Communication barriers also exist within organizations. Although all communication is subject to misunderstandings, business communication is particularly difficult. Barriers can be caused by: information overload, message complexity, message competition, differing status, lack of trust, inadequate communication structures, incorrect choice of medium, closed communication climate, unethical communication, inefficient communication, and physical distractions.

There are three distinct moments which can cause many communication barriers in organizations; during negotiations, when dealing with customers, and holding meetings. When you are negotiating, psychological barriers may arise. These psychological barriers may be yours or may belong to the other party. Be aware that people carry some of these barriers and 'listen' for their effects. Look for signs of them in the other party (and in yourself) and use your communication skills to ease or lower these barriers. Dealing with customers, in turn, can be very hard because some customers are hard to please and difficult situations can arise. If a high level of service is not provided, the result will not only be loss of business, but often an increase in the number of difficult and even abusive customers. They have not yet been lost. Deal with them professionally. The negotiating process, finally, demonstrates a fundamental tension between the claiming and creating of value. Value claimers view negotiations purely as an adversarial process. Each side strives to claim as much of a limited pie as possible by giving the other side as little as possible. Each party claims value through the use of manipulative tactics, forcible arguments, limited concessions, and hard bargaining. Value creators, in contrast, call for a process which results in joint gains to each party. They try to create additional benefits for each side in the negotiations. They emphasize shared interests, developing a collaborative relationship, and negotiating in a pleasant and cooperative manner.

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