

A Commitment to Improved Communication

Developing an individual's speaking, listening, questioning, reflecting and negotiating skills takes a fair amount of time and effort. And the short term motivations that people and organizations bring to the process may not keep them involved long enough to reach their goals.

Most business people begin to focus on communication skills because of a specific immediate need to have more productive, satisfying conversations with a particular person or within a particular work group. These reasons are perfectly good ones as far as they go, but they are often not very deep or long-term. The problem here is that developing an individual's speaking, listening, questioning, reflecting and negotiating skills takes a fair amount of time and effort. And the short term motivations that people and organizations bring to the process may not keep them involved long enough to reach their goals.

**QUICK
TIPS**

No one expects to become an athlete or a violinist overnight, but many people hope to make major improvements in their communication style with a minimum investment of time and effort, only to be disappointed at the meager results.

What seems to be needed in communication training are motivations that are deeper, more strategic and longer-term. Whenever we find examples of high competence and excellence in human life, we also find examples of deep, long-term motivations. This is not meant to discount short-term motivations or priorities, but to help create the level of motivation and inspiration necessary to reach a level of long-term communication excellence. Individuals and work groups should answer the following questions to help focus on the long-term benefits of more effective interpersonal communication:

- What kind of person do I want to become? What kind of organization do we want to create?
- What kind of person do I enjoy being? When are we most proud of our organization?
- How can I deepen my relationships with the important people in my life, and how can we nurture the life that lives between us? How can we create cohesive work groups that help us truly realize the extraordinary potential of our combined talents?
- What kind of world/work environment do I want to create with my conversations and actions?

These are tough, powerful questions that challenge individuals and organizations to develop deeper, more relational goals, rather than focusing exclusively on tactical work objectives. Again, the immediate, tactical goals are important, and greater communications skills can help achieve them, but it's the deeper goals that will maintain the skill development effort long enough to achieve true communication mastery. Developing better communication skills can be a central way of becoming more of the person you want to be and creating more of the organization you want to be a part of.

Practice matters more than talent

A recent statistical analysis of Olympic gold medal winners produced a result that is both startling and reassuring. The single most important factor in winning a gold medal was having practiced longer than one's competitors. The analysis showed that the winners had consistently started to practice their skills earlier in life than everyone else in the contests. The evidence strongly suggests that gold medal winners are not necessarily more talented than everybody else. They just work much harder and much longer at being athletes than everyone else does. What this implies is that, with practice, most skills are within the reach of most people.

Over-learning

There is an important psychological principle at work in all skill development and that principle is called over-learning. If we learn something just well enough to do it once successfully, we will not actually remember how to do it for very long. To master a skill, we have to practice it a lot more than would seem necessary. In order to remember better communication skills in the middle of arguments and tense negotiations, a person needs to feel very competent and comfortable in using those skills, just as an accomplished musician can play musical scales without consciously thinking about it. (Even the greatest of musicians still practice many hours a week.) The reward for practicing your communication skills is that you will feel better about yourself and your connections to the people around you, and be able to face conflict situations more confidently. You will probably also be able to get more of what you want -- by being skillful enough to help your partners in working and living get more of what they want, too.

Doing what comes naturally

It might seem as though we ought to be able to get through life by just "doing what comes naturally," that we should not have to try so hard. But if you stop to reflect on how humans learn to talk, it is clear that, as far as communication skills are concerned, we are born knowing how to cry, how to grunt, and how to learn everything else. That's about it. Almost all of what seems 'natural' to us now is the result of intense learning all through our lives. As natural as it may feel to use sarcasm or ask self-defeating questions, these are actions we learned by copying others. We can learn new skills that will in time feel as natural as the old ones. In fact, learning new skills is the most natural thing in the world. It is what we are designed to do as creatures with big brains and multipurpose hands.

Every Day – A New Lesson in Communication

A big part of mastering communication skills is learning to see opportunities to practice them. This involves seeing everyday conversations and disagreements in a new light, seeing them as opportunities to learn, grow, practice your skills and enjoy being skillful. Here are just a few examples of everyday situations that can be viewed as interpersonal communication lessons:

- Talking about thoughts, feelings, experiences and wants with the people who are close to you.
- Listening to co-workers, friends and family members share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- Talking with co-workers, friends and family members to express your appreciation of them.
- Talking with co-workers, friends and family members to resolve your conflicts with them.
- Talking and listening to coordinate your actions with the actions of the important people in your life (at home, in work, in community projects, etc.)
- Communicating with yourself through journal writing and "inner conversations."
- Listening and clarifying the issues as a mediator between people in conflict.
- Learning to bring out the best in yourself and others in and through conversation.

The growth and development of any organization is nothing more than the sum of the growth and development of its individual members, and every human being is born with both a capacity and a gentle yearning to grow in many directions: toward awareness, caring, relevance, creativity and so on. The more actions we perform that express these qualities, the more we have feelings of coherence, community, integrity, and well-being. We like ourselves more. The fewer of these kinds of actions we perform the more we have feelings of fragmentation, alienation, self-dislike, and perhaps numbness. Unfortunately, our "gentle yearning" to grow in these directions is easily overruled by harsh circumstances. Thus we need to work together to nurture those impulses in ourselves and others and so create a work environment that feels good to live in.

By improving our interpersonal communication – the way we talk and listen – we can create gentle waves of change in both our working relationships with other people and our inner relationship with ourselves. The ultimate result is individual development and organizational achievement that produces both intense employee satisfaction and extraordinary workplace productivity.
