

Communicate for Action

Effective communication is a critical competency for organizational success.

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Ask a group of employees about the challenges they face in their organization, and most often communication issues are close to the top of the list—even though there is no lack of information, strategies, tips, and training available on the subject. In fact, a recent Google Web search using the key words, “communication articles,” revealed 77.3 million hits. So why do organizations still encounter a corporate divide when it comes to communication?

One reason is because communication often is seen from the communicator or presenter’s point of view. What’s missing is the perspective of communication recipient or the listener. Unless the presenter incorporates the recipient’s needs and frame of reference in the message, the communication will remain ineffective. In other words, the information provided has to be viewed as interesting, useful, and/or relevant to the recipient in order for the recipient to be engaged and act on the message.

Compelling Communication

A persuasive message encourages the listener to take action, though not all communication is meant for this purpose. There are four categories of communication, varying in levels of listener engagement.

1. **Entertain.** The presenter shares an interesting tidbit of information with little expectation that the listener will act immediately on the message.
2. **Inform.** The presenter has a greater purpose in delivering these messages with the expectation that the listener will find value or purpose in them. The expectation for the listener’s response is still low, but the information is necessary to understand the context and perspective for future action.
3. **Convince.** The presenter wants to compel and influence the listener’s mind-set to think through an issue or recognize a problem. Immediate action isn’t always warranted, however. The broader purpose is for the listener to respond to the message with additional input or discussion.
4. **Communicate for Action.** A strong and immediate response from the listener is critical for these messages. Determining if the listener understands the message and is ready to take action is the goal of this communication.

Often, presenters believe they are using the “Communicate for Action” style, when in reality they are giving “Convincing” or “Informing” messages, resulting in disconnects between listeners and presenters. Presenters then become frustrated that their teams are not moving forward quickly on the action, and listeners are confused as to why the presenters are aggravated.

To avoid miscommunication, determine the desired listener response before presenting the message. Then frame the message in how the outcome benefits the listener, not the presenter. If immediate action is necessary, focus on providing the foundation and perspective of the communication. This is best accomplished by sharing an incident, situation, example, or background scenario. To assure a desired action is taken, wrap up the communication with a clear and concise call to action that demonstrates the benefit to the listener.

Telling Versus Communicating

Telling someone to do something is an example of one-way contact where the presenter controls the interaction. In other words, presenters are not worried about the listeners’ perspectives; rather their focus is on communicating their own messages directly. In some instances, this is the appropriate approach. Yet, too often presenters assume this command style of delivering

Communicate for Action BY KEVIN J. SENSENIG (Continued)

messages works in every situation, when it really doesn't. Unfortunately, the listener's perspective is ignored when people are told what to do, thus leading to limited passion, unsatisfactory outcomes, and disgruntled listeners.

A CEO of a mid-size firm was concerned about the need to build a stronger management team to prepare for future succession planning. He told his executive team about a leadership book he liked. The team read the book and in follow-up discussions decided that having all managers read the book was a good way to grow additional leadership talent. The CEO issued a challenge to the executives to inspire their teams to read and learn more about their future leadership with the organization.

One executive purchased a copy of that particular book for all of his managers. He told them, "Here's a book the CEO and I both read and really liked. In the next few weeks I want you to read this book and write a report about how to use the book's ideas. Be prepared to offer suggestions at the next meeting on how to implement the information from the book."

Unfortunately, since the managers were told what to do, they complained about how silly it was — like they were in seventh grade writing a book report. They went through the motions and did what was asked of them, but without enthusiasm or a feeling of purpose. They didn't buy into the book's ideas or use the information effectively. Instead, they just completed the task to get it checked off their list. As a result, they were not invested in the company's leadership goal and were less innovative and productive than prior to being given the book project.

Understanding the Listener's Perspective

How does one make the switch from telling to communicating for action? By providing the relevant background, defining the action and benefit for the listener, and facilitating engagement in the process.

Another executive from that mid-sized firm gathered her team and said, "The CEO is challenging us to build our leadership capacity and become more effective at leading this organization. One of the ways we can do this is by reading more about leadership. I encourage you to select a leadership book to read over the next few weeks. This will help you build your own leadership perspective for future growth." Not only did the team members read a variety of leadership books, but their leadership conversations were robust and exciting. They were engaged in the assignment and began identifying coworkers with long-term capacity for the organization.

Even though both teams received similar assignments, the communication style for each executive represented the difference in the outcomes. The first told his team what to do without providing the background on the situation or the benefit to the team. The second gave the situation and framework of leadership development and asked her team to take action, resulting in an increase in their managerial capabilities (the benefit).

Importance of Message Consistency

Communication is critical for organization success. While leaders may know the basics of communication, everyone can improve in communicating with focus and purpose. To communicate for action, present a perspective on why the communication is important. Be clear on the action desired while plainly stating the benefit of taking the suggested action. Implementing this strategy will clear up miscommunication, allowing colleagues to take the action needed for organization success.

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