

Communications: The Key to Leadership Effectiveness

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Even if you do learn to speak correct English, to whom are you going to speak it?

-- Clarence Darrow

In the days of Western black and white movies, it was easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys. The good guys wore white hats and the bad guys wore black hats. Speech was seldom a determining factor in the start of the movie, but often the good guy had a swagger that emphasized his superiority.

Well, the movies have it all wrong. The good guys (and gals), such as project leaders, have to communicate through more than color of attire and perhaps a bit of swagger. The effective project leader must convey essential information to the project team in a manner that is understood and team members are able to comply with the directions.

Communicating to everyone is not an easy task. Often, there are disagreements on style that serve to effectively block communication. For example, distrust of a leader can cause the listener to question directions and seek to validate the information before performing a task. It reminds me of the manager who was a notorious liar – and he was good at it. When one of his subordinates recalled that he told the truth once, it was called an “honest mistake.”

Diverse Group Dynamics

During a recent trip to Zurich, Switzerland, I participated in a workshop with seven other people where the business was conducted in the English language. These seven people all spoke English as a second language although their native languages were German, Dutch, Finnish, Hungarian, or Chinese. The product of the workshop is a British English-language document.

It was challenging to select the correct English words to convey the meaning when many of the thoughts were in a different language. It was most helpful in that everyone was searching for the most accurate interpretation of the intent of the document. Some examples were the use of “priority” for “precedence” and “proven” for “recommended”. The cooperative environment was most helpful in achieving the workshop’s goals.

The strength of the workshop communication was that a person had to listen carefully to the exchanges and often obtain the meaning of words from their context.

Words from a language other than English often do not always translate on a one-for-one basis.

There is the story (and it may be true) about the translation by computer of an American saying into Russian and back to English. “Out of sight, out of mind” was translated into Russian and then from Russian into English. In the loop, “out of sight, out of mind” was returned to English as “invisible idiot.”

The workshop was successful because everyone wanted to achieve the goal of developing a document that would convey the accurate meaning in English. Though the document is being reviewed by legal counsel, it is a model of cooperation and agreement as to the intent of the terms and clauses. The product will serve the community well.

Body Language

Body language is more often the truth than the spoken word. A manager was responding to a proposal saying “Yes, send me a proposal and we will act upon it right away.” All the time, she was shaking her head back and forth, indicating “no way will we approve any proposal.” The proposal was prepared, but there was never a response to it.

Another instance of body language was demonstrated by a boss. He raised his voice in an angry tone and stated, “there is no way we will do that.” His manner was not typical and could have been defined as illogical. He had not heard the facts, but made his decision, seemingly, based on very little information. Later, I learned that he knew the situation fully. The show of anger was an act to cut off further discussion. In the boss’s high school days, he acted in plays and was using his acting ability to settle a business situation.

Examples of Miscommunications

The TV show, “All in the Family,” featuring Carroll O’Connor, had some of the classic one liners that conveyed messages in a unique fashion. Archie Bunker had his wife going to the gynecologist. Archie’s son-in-law stated his opposition to religion by stating “Thank God I’m an atheist.” The show raised a level of awareness in all viewers that perhaps our oral communications were less than perfect.

During a meeting it became apparent that one person was not in agreement. She raised unimportant matters to deflect the focus of the meeting.

A few silent stares gave her the message that she was being disruptive. In response, she quickly stated “Well, I don’t want to be an adjutant to the situation.” Whereas “adjutant” was meant to convey “not one who agitates” where the real meaning of adjutant means “one who helps.” Everyone agreed that she was not an adjutant.

Another person, through family discussions, learned words that sounded good, but were improper. He used the word “sourcastic” several times before being corrected that the word was actually “sarcastic.” Several other words were coined close to the real word such as “won’t” for “want” and “salit” for salad.”

The challenge to helping people by correcting their misspoken words is human nature. “I would rather make a mistake a thousand times than to be corrected once.”

In Summary

If a person wants to improve in leadership, perhaps the first area, but not necessarily the easiest, to focus on is communication – both written and oral. Written communications are necessary to convey information that has long-term value, such as a project plan, contract, and communication plan. Oral communications are short-term directions or information that convey a situation or desired action.

Working with people to understand their message is perhaps the best method of improving listening skills. It is okay to paraphrase another’s message to provide feedback and validate the information. It is probably unwise to correct another’s English. It is okay to laugh at one’s self when making an error in speaking. *Laughing at someone’s spoken language* is wrong, but it is okay to **laugh with** someone at errors in the spoken language.

Reading and public speaking can improve a person’s understanding and improvement in the use of English. Understanding others and their background can help working through language difficulties. Effective communication gets the job done better than miscommunication.

Effective project leaders amplify their project results by demonstrating their range of written and oral communication competences.

Communicating effectively to a diverse staff tests a leader’s ability to convey information, instructions, and direction for a project. Writing reports that can be understood by a range of people from senior managers to administrative staff tests a leader’s ability to formally communicate.

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Lew Ireland is an Executive Project Management Consultant based in Tennessee and serving both US and international clients. He has worked with clients to establish their project management systems to ensure they are supportive of the organizations’ respective goals. He is experienced in all phases of project management that include planning, scheduling, project office implementation, project maturity modeling, and project assessment.

Lew has authored or co-authored project management books and articles for professional journals. He is a continual contributor to the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management*, regularly writing short articles for our website. He was recently appointed a Consulting Editor to McGraw-Hill Publishing Companies for a project management series of books.

Lew has a history of serving for nearly 25 years in volunteer positions to advance project management. He is past President and Chair of the Project Management Institute and has served in various positions within PMI®. He has been recognized by PMI® for his contributions by the Distinguished Contribution Award, Person of the Year, and elected a Fellow of the Institute.

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