

Speedbump #39: Unclear, Imprecise Communication

Every day, communication methods continue to improve, in ways both cultural and technological. In this Speedbump, I'll suggest three basic ways to improve your ability to get your point across to others with greater precision.

I can't overstate the importance of open communication with your team members. Keep all team goals, imperatives, initiatives, and strategic alignments as transparent as possible. This helps your team members find reasons to own their jobs and increase their engagement and discretionary effort. Learning which communication methods work best for each team member; using simple, clear, concise language; and listening to what others have to say will all save time.

Sometimes we're so busy throwing work to our team members, we don't take the time to be clear and concise in our instructions and make sure we're understood. I worked with a VP of Finance who asked her analyst to get a figure to put into her PowerPoint presentation for an upcoming meeting. The analyst went away and came back the next day with an *exact* figure, down to the 7th decimal place. The VP was stunned and asked, "How long did it take you to come up with that?"

The analyst proudly responded, "Ten hours," to which the VP almost fell over.

She said, "I was just looking for plus or minus a few million!" The VP thought the analyst would spend 15 minutes on it and quickly ballpark the number, but she never communicated that, and the analyst never asked. Without the proper communication, they both missed.

The VP should have said, "I'm looking for a high-level guess for this presentation. Is it 5 million or 50 million?" The analyst should have said, "I'm happy to come up with this figure you're requesting, but it's going to take me many hours. Is that what you want?" Then the VP could decide if the amount of work was worth it for that particular speech. Lacking that communication, both of them were at fault for the wasted time.

Be Courteous When You Communicate

Really? Do we still have to remind each other to be courteous? Didn't our parents teach us this? It's worth a quick reminder on a few things. Remember that it's hard to pick up tone in emails; use careful wording if your points might be misinterpreted. Ask people if they have time to talk when dropping into their offices. If you must check your phone for an important message, let people know in advance. If you receive a message and can't handle it right away, acknowledge receipt of the communication and give an estimation of the timeline and next steps.

Think Through the Most Efficient Communication Medium before You Knee-Jerk

- Hold meetings for strategic planning, decision making, problem solving, and brainstorming.
- Don't use email or text when an extended back-and-forth is needed; call or meet instead.
- Use email vs. texting or IM if your message contains information the recipient may want to keep.
- Don't use email to deal with sensitive issues, coaching, or corrective action.
- Don't send the same message in multiple mediums (send an IM and then an email).
- Work to have a face-to-face meeting if more than an hour is needed.

Use Extreme Care with Escalated Issues

Deal with issues at the appropriate level; go through the proper chain of command. Send concerns to the appropriate team member if you're involved prematurely; state how the recipient can get help and extricate yourself from the string. Focus on core strategy and prioritize your issues; not everything is urgent. Recognize that email is not real time; if the issue is truly urgent, call or stop by. Don't "go over people's heads." Adding unnecessary recipients into a string is often seen as a bullying tactic.

The Bottom Line

Apply transparency, techno-savvy, and forward thinking to upcoming tech solutions, and the likelihood of poor communication clogging your productivity processes will decline dramatically. We may never achieve perfection, but we can get closer.