

Workplace Communication: Old Challenges, New Opportunities

By David A. O'Brien




J. Edgar Hoover, the esteemed but often controversial head of the FBI who served under several different Presidents, was once surprised to discover a rather dramatic increase in FBI activity along the Canadian and Mexican borders. When the FBI director investigated, he found the problem. It turned out that a month or so earlier Hoover's secretary had asked him to review one of the memos she had typed for him. She wanted him to correct any errors before she sent the memo out to FBI field offices. When Hoover finished his edits, he observed that the margins of the note were much too wide. So he wrote, "watch the borders" at the bottom of the memo and gave it back to his secretary to fix and distribute. She logically assumed that Hoover's "watch the borders" comment related to some intelligence alert that he wanted distributed to his FBI border patrols.

While it is unlikely that a communication error of such magnitude would occur in corporate life today, the likelihood that our written and verbal communications are at times misinterpreted remains a very real obstacle in achieving our business objectives. Often, what we say and what is heard is amazingly different. In fact, interpersonal communication skills remain high on the list of desired competencies for workplace success. Therefore, it is no wonder that the issue of workplace communication effectiveness takes center stage in companies from Boston to Bangkok.

Workplace communication can be easy, but requires great care and planning with customers, peers and other co-workers. One of the most important elements of planning is seeking to be a good listener. Knowing your communication goals and desired outcomes is a critical piece of the planning puzzle. However, without a strong desire and commitment to be an active listener, your communication goals and outcomes may not be fully achieved.

Understanding that most people want to be heard more than they want you to agree with them, is a good foundation for achieving your communication goals. Many people complain about not being heard, yet they rarely take the time to listen to others.



Despite the many challenges of communicating effectively, good communication skills can be learned. The following are some suggestions for improving your workplace communication effectiveness and impact.

1. Truly listen and focus on what the other person is saying. Put yourself in "their shoes."
2. Look for common ground. Resist the temptation to focus on differences.
3. Don't interrupt the person. Let them tell their whole story.
4. Restate what you think you heard. Strive for clarity and understanding.
5. Stay positive and be a role model for effective communication. Your goal is to create win-win every time!

From improving interpersonal relationships to achieving more win-win outcomes, the pursuit of successful communication is worth the effort. We each have an opportunity to increase our communication effectiveness and impact. While the skills required to achieve this goal can be learned, they do not occur without awareness, commitment and practice. When we communicate effectively, we succeed.

As the range and pace of change accelerate at work and the demands of doing "more with less" becomes a daily reality, improving the impact of our workplace communication may be the first step in turning old challenges into new opportunities. ■

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David is also presenting a workshop for Connecticut Association of Nonprofits. LEADER AS A COACH will be held on March 28 from 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. at the Green Street Arts Center in Middletown. This program provides leaders with an actionable framework for improving the employee development process. The workshop will contain materials and assessments including the Coaching Effectiveness Inventory (CEI), the Career Readiness Profile (CRP) and the Leader's Coaching Game Plan. For more information and to register, visit www.ctnonprofits.org/education/offerings.