

JOELLE K JAY

ON COMMUNICATING WELL USE THESE FIVE STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE YOUR MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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One of the biggest challenges managers face is communication. And yet, communication is also one of the most critical aspects of leadership. Without good communication, managers can fail to gain commitment from employees, fail to achieve business goals and fail to develop rapport with the people on their team. In short, they can fail as leaders no matter how good their intentions may be.

Sound scary? It can be, especially for first-time managers. Front-line employees simply don't need the same level of communication skills as leaders do. But when employees rise to leadership positions, they must learn to connect with a greater number of people more effectively to get the job done.

Managers can enhance their communication skills with commitment and practice using a few key strategies that will help determine what, when and how to communicate effectively.

LISTENING

The most effective leaders know when to stop talking and start listening. This is especially important in three particular situations: when emotions are high, in team situations and when employees are sharing ideas.

First, listening is crucial when emotions are high. Extreme emotions, such as anger, resentment and excitement, warrant attention from a personal and a business standpoint. On a personal level, people feel acknowledged when others validate their feelings. Managers who ignore feelings can create distance between themselves and their employees, eroding the relationship and ultimately affecting the working environment.

From a business perspective, emotions can also interfere with clear thinking. Allowing employees to address their emotions helps them move beyond the situation at hand in an effective way and get back to business. Managers can develop stronger relationships with their employees while enhancing productivity simply by listening to their employees when emotions are high.

The second most important time to listen is in team situations. Team environments can involve multiple personalities, complex dynamics and competing agendas. By listening carefully, managers can ensure that everyone is working toward the same goal. Listening also helps managers identify and address conflicts early, as well as facilitate healthy working relationships among team members.

Third, listening is vital when employees are sharing ideas. When managers stop listening to ideas, employees stop offering them. That means managers are essentially cut off from the creativity and expertise of the people on their team, and leadership becomes an illusion.

In these and almost any situation, the advantages of listening make it worth doing well. The basic fundamentals of good listening include the following:

- Attending closely to what's being said, not to what you want to say next.
- Allowing others to finish speaking before taking a turn.
- Repeating back what you've heard to give the speaker the opportunity to clarify the message.

With these fundamentals, managers can clearly communicate that they care about what the speaker is saying and want to help.

FACILITATING

Facilitating communication is more than just listening, and it is more than leading a conversation. Good facilitation is a continuous cycle of three steps: hearing what is said, integrating it into the topic at hand and saying something to move the conversation forward.

For example, imagine a manager facilitating a meeting in which she and her team are developing goals for the coming year. The conversation might sound something like this:

Manager: As we develop our goals for next year, it's important that we hear from everyone in the department. What are your ideas?

Employee 1: I think it's important that we get productivity up. I notice we have a pretty relaxed pace around here, and it gets frustrating when some people are working hard and others seem to be contributing less than others.

Manager: OK, so we need improved productivity. What would that look like as a goal?

Employee 2: Actually, I think it's more a matter of setting a higher sales goal than improving productivity in the office. We don't just need to be busier, we need to get better results.

Manager: I see. So the idea is that we should set higher sales goals for everyone, which would consequently address the productivity issue. Is that right?

Employees: Yes.

Notice in this exchange that the manager took the time to repeat what she heard so that the employees could verify its accuracy. She also integrated each comment into the topic at hand—tying the first employee's frustration with productivity to the task (goal-setting), and connecting the second employee's point about sales to the topic on the table (productivity). Even though her employees were giving all of the input, the manager stayed focused on the task of preparing goals and led all comments in that direction.

QUESTIONING

Many leaders need information but aren't sure how to get it. Similarly, their employees may have information but don't know how to impart it. Managers can open the lines of communication by asking good questions. Note that different kinds of questions yield different kinds of results. Here is a short primer on questioning:

- *Closed questions* are those that elicit yes/no answers. These are beneficial when a manager simply needs to check the status of an issue. Has the report been completed? Do you know what to do? Can you get that to me by Friday? These are examples of closed questions that are perfectly appropriate in the right situations. Allowing others to finish speaking before taking a turn.
- *Open questions* are those that elicit longer responses. They are useful almost anytime a manager wants more than a yes/no answer—for instance, when seeking input from others, looking for information about a particular topic or exploring a problem. What do you think would be the best way to go about this? How are you doing on that project? What went wrong? These kinds of questions give others the chance to give all of the information they have and to avoid the innumerable consequences that can come when leaders make assumptions without becoming well-informed.
- *Personal questions* have a special role in leadership. Inappropriate personal questions can alienate employees. Asking direct reports if they are dating anyone or why they haven't bought a house can be perceived as prying, even if the questions are well-intended. Appropriate personal questions, however, can create a sense of camaraderie between employee and boss. Asking whether employees had a nice weekend, inquiring about their families or following up on common interests all help people connect on a personal level. That relationship leads to a greater commitment as well as a more pleasant environment.

USING DISCRETION

Knowing when not to speak as a leader is just as important as speaking. Managers must understand that the moment they don a new title, they become a leader—one that others look to for guidance, direction and even protection. Good leaders adopt a policy of discretion, if not confidentiality, with their employees. Only then can they develop the trust that is so vital to productivity.

Confidential situations may arise in a number of areas, personal and professional. Here are some topics that may warrant discretion:

- An employee is having a direct conflict with another employee.
- An employee is concerned about another employee's conduct.
- An employee's performance has dropped substantially.
- An employee has a health issue or personal problem.
- An employee wants genuine advice on how to excel but doesn't want to be seen as cozing up to the boss.

In any of these cases, the employee is facing circumstances that affect him personally and could affect business if not addressed effectively. A manager who invites a confidential conversation could help the employee discuss the situation openly and develop strategies to handle it well. But a manager whose trustworthiness is questionable will undoubtedly scare away any hope for a candid discussion. The consequences could have a bearing on the employee's ability to perform at his best.

How do managers communicate that they can be trusted? One approach is to tell employees directly that you are always available for private conversations when needed. Managers who do this further assure employees who come to them that the conversation will be kept confidential. Then managers keep that promise. In the end, actions speak louder than words. When managers talk behind their employees' backs, gossip or show favoritism of any kind, employees doubt their discretion and opt to keep their thoughts to themselves. The lines of communication shut down, to the potential detriment of the team.

DIRECTING

Notice that directing comes last on the list of communication strategies. It may not be the least important, but it is definitely one to use less often. Many managers direct their employees because they believe it's the only way to get things done. It is not. The other forms of communication discussed above—listening, facilitating, questioning, using discretion—can all get employees working more productively in a spirit of cooperation and in a more friendly environment than directing.

But directing has its place. Directing means giving directions clearly and unequivocally, such that people know exactly what to do and when. It is best used in times of confusion, or when efficiency is the most important goal. Although it can be effective, directing also can lead to complacency on the part of employees who may adopt an “I just do what they tell me” attitude. Use it sparingly.

BENEFITS TO COMMUNICATION

Communication takes effort. But it is effort well-spent given the benefits—a more pleasant, more productive work setting in which everyone feels valued, ideas are shared openly, and relationships are characterized by trust.

One last tip: When you practice good communication, notice the effect. The results that come from communicating wisely will be the proof that communication really is the key to good management.



Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D., is president of the leadership development practice, Pillar Consulting. As an executive coach, author and speaker, Joelle helps leaders achieve top performance and business results. Her clients include presidents, vice presidents, and C-level executives in Fortune 500 companies. Joelle is the author of *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*. To find out how Joelle can help you reach the next level, visit: www.TheInnerEdge.com.