

ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

Do we really listen to what people tell us, and do we offer an environment where people will tell the truth? Taking into account another’s perspective is essential to navigate through the communications minefields. **Brenda Hales**, with contributions from **Donnie MacNicol**, explores the complex world of words.



BRENDA HALES: learn, listen and understand if you want effective communications.

YES MINISTER: Donnie MacNicol cautions against CEO disease and surrounding yourself with sycophants

“THEY just don’t get it,” says a disgruntled project manager on leaving the team briefing meeting. Turning to me he asks: “What can I do about them?” Albert Einstein’s words jostle to be heard: “Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I’m not sure about the universe”. I refrain and simply advise that we reflect with open minds and get together early the next day to consider how we can learn from the experience.

The parallel challenge now for me - how to communicate in a way that can be understood by this well-intentioned, hard working, though now embattled and self justifying project manager. He had forgotten: “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong” [H L Mencken].

In the same way as this person attempted to persuade his team, most communication plans provide copious amounts of lifeless data on who, when, how and what needs to be done. While such plans provide a useful method, a kind of sophisticated tick list, typically they make the assumption that if we ‘get it right’ then the people who are on the receiving end will accept what is being communicated. Yet so much evidence demonstrates this is not the case and misses the fundamental predicament of all communication — people don’t think alike.

So if communicating well is complicated and yet remains one of the key factors in enabling your project to be considered a success, we suggest be clear and positive about your intentions. “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” [Antoine de Saint-Exupry].

Ask a project manager about their project and if they turn to the plan and explain when it will be delivered be seriously concerned. This is just one technical aspect of a mass of possible detail to be managed and it inspires few. If we want to lead people to embrace the change inherent in most of today’s projects we must enthuse them. So, first we need to be sure we are motivated enough by what we are undertaking – without this we will be at best competent in our field.

Then before approaching anyone, formally or otherwise, be clear about precisely what you want the other person or group to understand, accept, do or change. Honesty and authenticity are your best tools. If you know something is going to happen that will be painful it is better to be honest. False hope is worse than most reality: knowing you will be made redundant at least brings the rumours and fears to an end, the risk becomes a known problem and can then be tackled.

What about when you feel unable to be authentic because of all those “politically sensitive,” issues? Our advice is to tread very carefully. It is all too easy for small and helpful mistruths to escalate. “How do you get an honest man to lose his ethical compass? You get him to

take one step at a time, and self justification will do the rest,” [C Tarvis and E Aronson].

Be clear about your true intentions, sharing what you can and clearly identifying what you cannot reveal and people will more likely trust you enough to lead them into the unknown. If you have decided something has to be imposed then don't try and disguise it by saying you are seeking to “involve people in the decision making process” or you want to “engage in a dialogue”. Yes, I've seen both of these sheep and no-one was fooled.

Actively seek to understand others' perspectives. “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” [S Covey] Take every opportunity to ask, probe and understand what others are, and are not, saying. They need to feel confident enough in your intention to tell you the truth. This does not mean you will agree, but it does mean people feel heard, can contribute and you will know the territory you are approaching.

The project manager is at the centre of an intricate network of relationships – customers, suppliers, stakeholders and team members – each with different perspectives on the project. These views are further complicated by the individuals within these groupings, who each have different personalities, values, styles, motivations, interests and perceptions. As we really start to work with the complexity of this, imagining there could ever be one message that would suffice becomes totally unrealistic.

Part of seeking understanding is identifying not just the titles people have, but how much influence they have in their group or community. There is no quicker way than to ask: how about “who in this company would you be most willing to believe if they were to tell you this was a good idea?” You will quickly track down the real influencers if you are willing to listen yourself.

Learning more soft skills will also help efforts to communicate. As Eric Hoffer says: “In times of change learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

If the projects you are delivering, and will continue to deliver, are technical systems or infrastructure that has no impact on people, then the training you have probably received so far about tools, methods and processes will be just fine. Communication based on the form of announcements, information and plans that have a one-way broadcast will probably suffice. But if you are engaged in one of the increasingly large number of projects or programmes that require people to understand, accept and change something, you are going to need to find ways that are less about an old command and control management style and more about leading people to choose to be supportive.

Discover how you can add to your leadership capability by learning how to take on more of a coaching approach with others.



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When you encounter resistance, David Friedman has some advice: “The direct use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations.”

How many projects have failed because we have ignored, the admittedly inconvenient reality, that most change, at most times, for most people, is at best unpleasant and at worst to be resisted? Expect resistance. Seek it out. Look on it as a gift that might just save you making a terrible mistake.

The more you learn about yourself and others through developing your soft skills, the more likely you are to be comfortable on this fascinating discovery of just how different people really are.

Winston Churchill said that courage is “what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen”, so accept feedback – even when you don't like it. One of the greatest dangers for anyone in a position of authority is suffering from CEO disease. Often self-inflicted by the appointment of ‘like-minded’ people, the leader must guard against only welcoming good feedback. If you do this it is all that you will hear.

Listening is without doubt an underrated skill. How about that deafening silence at the project meeting when no-one disputes in the room the joint action, yet seconds later the corridors resonate with rejection. Or someone explaining something was good, only for you to find out later that their interpretation of the word ‘good’ was extremely different to yours.

Listening to what is not being said is an art form I would recommend you cultivate. We all hold different expectations and values. We make judgements based on our experience and assumptions, and our intentions are not always clear, even to ourselves. Opportunities to miss each other are many and varied. The best antidote is to listen.

Don't believe something just because you'd like it to be true: as George Bernard Shaw once said: "The problem with communication ... is the illusion that it has been accomplished." You know this one only too well. How often does the completion of a point on one of our plans delude us into thinking we have actually achieved something.

Never can this be more certain than that we have communicated by undertaking a presentation or an event that provides participants with the message. How about the one where the project manager was pleased that no-one contested her decision to move the project team to a location much closer to the customer. Congratulating herself on her persuasive abilities lasted about as long as it took the HR director to advise her that she would no longer be running the project. Every one of the well respected top team had made

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sure they were heard, they did successfully communicate, just not with her.

Oh, and about the project manager I mentioned at the beginning. I can almost hear you asking, "I suppose you are going to tell us, that the next day he got it?" Well I'm afraid there was no happy ending. As so many of us do at times of strain when communication has broken down he retreated into authoritarian mode and re-loaded his arguments. He stumbled on with the project until he was replaced by a project manager who revitalised the project team. How did he do this? By demonstrating the power of really listening. He remembered what so many of us forget "we have two ears and one mouth, so we can hear twice as much as we speak." [Epictetus]

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