



Asking right questions, listening still key to powerful communication



ON THE JOB

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Information overload is all around. As a business professional, you are constantly being bombarded with information, messages, pictures and images. Computers, televisions, blackberries and other high-tech and low-tech gear are running us in circles with literally thousands of messages a day. It's often difficult to pay attention and focus on one thing at a time. You may find that multi-tasking is not all it's cracked up to be. There's simply too much stuff.

While these communications tools are quite useful in today's competitive world, it's ironic that our human and interpersonal communication often requires our utmost and undivided attention. In order to have the effective and powerful communication skills needed in the workplace, you must learn to speak and listen to other people without the outside distractions and conflicting messages vying for your attention. Your ability to engage people in conversations is at the core of business communications.

The most important ways to communicate, build rapport with colleagues and prospects, gather information and conduct business lies in your capacity to ask quality questions. This usually can't be done effectively if you are distracted with cell phones, PDAs and other communications tools. You may be able to ask a question while sending a text message but the quality of it will probably be poor. That's because your attention is not fully on the conversation. The result is a disconnect between listening to the response and your ability to drive the conversation forward with effective follow-up questions and dialogue. Your failure to ask powerful questions, along with poor listening skills, often means that you may walk out of meetings frustrated because there are communication barriers that could have been avoided. Often times, the person who is looking for information has failed to ask the right questions and leaves without the sale, the new job, or the settled disagreement.

People who ask quality questions are empowered. People who ask questions are psychologically in control of the conversation. Most high achieving sales professionals, lawyers, psychologists, teachers and news reporters can directly attribute their success to their knack of asking quality questions.

Tips

Here are five tips to asking good questions:

- Ask open-ended questions. These start with words such as who, what, where, when, why and how. They require the person responding to open up and share information and details. If you ask close-ended questions that simply require a yes or no response, the conversation will likely come to a close or dead-end.

- Ask for specifics. By being inquisitive and requesting clarification in conversations, you will develop a more thorough understanding of the issue at hand. In addition, you will also be showing the person you are speaking with that you are truly paying attention and are interested. Some examples include "What exactly do you mean?" and "Can you give me two or three goals that you would like us to achieve by the end of the contract?"

- Tune into others. Factual information is important but emotions in communication shouldn't be ignored. Questions like "What are your priorities?" and "What's most important to you?" are good ways of tuning into other people.

- Go deep. Questions provide us with valuable information. If your boss is critical of how you handled a project, avoid asking yourself that dreaded and pitiful "why me?" question and instead pose the following questions to him or her: "What specifically would you recommend that I do differently in the future?" "What specific areas were up to your satisfaction and where could I have made improvements?" Put a positive and specific spin on your questions and you'll quickly get to the core of the situation.

- Focus. By really paying attention and using active listening skills, without the distractions of beeping cell phones and PDAs, you will be present in the conversation and be able to think, probe and diagnose. Without focusing your complete attention on the conversation at hand, you will miss opportunities and important details.

Listening

The quality of your questions and how you

engage people in conversation is directly linked to your ability to listen. Strong leaders are excellent communicators. They don't just hear the noise of someone's voice droning on in a conversation. They listen intently to the words and delivery and are actively involved in the conversation.

The art of listening can be learned. Here are some tips to help improve your listening:

- Listen with your mouth closed. The words "listen" and "silent" are an anagram. They have the same letters but in a different order. You can't listen while you're talking.

- Avoid interrupting. Allow the other person to fully express their thought before you respond. Interrupting is a sign of rudeness. One person should be speaking at a time.

- Use the "P-R-R" method. Pause, reflect and respond. When asked a question, pause for a brief second, reflect for another second or two and then respond. Racing to answer a question doesn't mean you're going to win. It means you may not have given yourself the opportunity to truly think about what you want to say. The goal is to respond, not react.

- Repeat key information. Paraphrasing important details in a meeting or conversation can help to ensure that you understand what the other person is saying. It also reaffirms to them that you have been paying attention.

- Use their names. Everyone's favorite word is the sound of their own name. It's awfully sweet to the ears. Weaving their name into a conversation periodically can make someone's day.

English Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said, "Nature has given us two ears, but only one mouth. This may be nature's way of telling us that listening is vital to our ability to communicate." Disraeli lived in the 1800s without the convenience of computers, pagers and cell phones.

It's a wonderful and timeless reminder that nothing can replace human communication.

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