

Communication Skills TRAINING

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Identifying Communication Needs Within an Organization

What's in This Chapter?

- ◆ Discussion of the impact of diversity on an organization
- ◆ Description of the interplay of communication and organizational dynamics
- ◆ Examination of workplace relationships
- ◆ Discussion of employee surveys and needs assessments

Understanding the Impact of Diversity on an Organization

There are many different styles and cultures in the workplace today. They are not only the products of various races and ethnic backgrounds, but also the products of family dynamics, life experience, and inevitable personal biases. We all bring our own perspective on life to every situation we encounter. Our perspective is a filter through which we view life, and our biases are the dust particles that contaminate the filter. It is essential that you as the facilitator be aware of the dust on your own filter. Our filters need to be inspected and cleaned regularly to make sure that they are not dusty and do not obscure the view.

The role that diversity plays in organizations today is viewed from both a positive and a negative perspective. Viewed positively, diversity enriches an organization, fosters creativity, enables more effective customer service, and creates a more balanced workplace. Viewed negatively, diversity can create barriers to communication; challenge existing corporate values and beliefs; and magnify the differences among those in the workplace, thereby causing intolerance and unrest. This of course is a generalization about the role of diversity in an organization because volumes have been written about this topic.

How Communication Can Affect Organizational Dynamics

As was mentioned in chapter 1, poor communication can contribute to ineffective working relationships, low morale, costly mistakes, reduced job performance, and even malicious withholding of critical information within an organization. Ultimately a commitment must be made to establish an environment of openness and honesty. If there have been many years of poor communication and mistrust, it is likely that it will take some time to rebuild the trust and willingness to be open and honest. Consider your organizational culture along the following lines:



1. Does the organization encourage and reward open and honest communication? (If the answer to this question is “yes,” the organization is likely to have a positive and open workplace environment. If the answer is “no,” the organization may find it difficult to engage employees and solicit honest feedback.)
2. Does the organization have many closed-door meetings? (If the answer to this question is “yes,” the organizational culture may be one of suppression and secrecy, and there will be very little trust within the organization. If the answer is “no,” the organizational culture will tend to be more open and flexible, encouraging spontaneous and ongoing communication.)
3. Does the organization withhold information from certain levels of employees? (If the answer to this question is “yes,” the organization may have a strict hierarchical structure that creates operational silos and discourages innovation. If the answer is “no,” the organization will typically encourage initiative and innovation, thus giving employees access to any information they need to complete their work effectively.)
4. Does the organization make information available to all stakeholders? (If the answer to this question is “yes,” the organization will have the culture of a learning organization, empowering employees to be creative, innovative, and involved. If the answer is “no,” the organization may have a culture of power and control, and may keep a watchful eye on access to company information.)

In general, responses that reflect a culture of openness and access to information typically identify a positive work environment; responses that reflect a

closed and controlling culture in the organization typically identify a negative work environment. To create an effective and successful organization, you must first create a vision for the organization and its culture, and then you must begin to build the appropriate components to enable progress. Improving communication in an organization is only one step toward the goal of a successful and positive organization.

Workplace Relationships

When participants enter a classroom they carry with them the effects of the communication style within their company or organization. Some will come from an environment where the communication is open and comfortable. Others will have evolved in a structured, formal environment. Each participant will be seeking solutions to apply to different situations. Let's break the communication relationships down into separate elements.

INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION

The first thing that a parent waits to hear from a child is the sound of the child's voice. We celebrate this event, even when the words are unintelligible. The event indicates a rite of passage into the world of adult interaction. However, not every child grows up in a home where communication is comfortable. A young child absorbs much of the behavior he or she is exposed to before the age of 7, and this pattern of behavior can continue into adulthood.

Therefore, in your class you will have people who communicate better one-to-one than in a group and others who prefer the opposite forum. Some will communicate reticently, some boldly, and some with ease and fluency.

It is your role to identify each learner's natural style early on in the workshop process. Quiet participants generally prefer to listen and observe. Be careful not to regard this as nonengagement and overlook their importance. Respect a person's individuality. Whether a person is introverted or outgoing, he or she deserves deference. Honor a participant's approach and acknowledge his or her input. If you don't do this, you may alienate the student and create a negative atmosphere. When a class sees you demonstrate respect, it is more likely that members will take this approach in their own workplace interactions.

Every group has a person who likes to hold the floor. This person must be acknowledged for his or her input and then reminded of time constraints in the classroom. If the boldness persists, consider giving this person a task or re-

sponsibility that consumes energy but makes the person feel important to the process. (This personality type is discussed in chapter 1.)

You can draw out a quiet participant by placing him or her in small work groups where the fear of communication feels less extreme. Partnering this person with someone who communicates openly also supports the development process.

TEAM COMMUNICATION

One of the biggest challenges in team communication is the diversity of individual styles. Completing a personality profile that reveals the range of styles on the team helps members of the team communicate effectively. There are literally hundreds of personality profiling instruments on the market today. This can make the choice of instrument daunting. One test that has been used for 60 years is the *MBTI* or *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. A recent report indicates that 89 companies out of the *Fortune* 100 use the *MBTI*. This assessment identifies introverted or extroverted behavior, and whether a person is a thinker or a perceiver, judgmental or intuitive. Another personality test is the *DiSC Personal Profile System*. This instrument uses the four main personality characteristics of domination, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness. These two tests can be accessed on the Internet and may require licensing before you use them. As a facilitator, occasionally you will group your participants into teams without the benefit of a personality profile. Therefore, it is important that you understand the dynamics of group interaction.

When you assemble a team it is helpful to mix opposing personalities to provide variety and balance in the team exchange. Participants with the same style who group together will not share an enhanced learning experience because they will work within similar parameters.

When a team is formed by participants from different departments within an organization, introduction and icebreaker activities will provide a communication door through which participants can enter comfortably.

DEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION

Frequently you will encounter competition among participants from the same department who are maneuvering for superiority or advancement. You have to recognize this behavior and maintain an atmosphere of fairness throughout the training session.

Participants from the same department will often form a solid alliance and challenge other participants who endeavor to team with them. You must recognize this behavior and handle it with care to avoid divisiveness in the workshop. Using random numbering to form groups will help allay this counter-productive pattern.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION

Departments in organizations are increasingly forced to collaborate today. Information technology personnel support the entire operation and Human Resources provides guidance and staffing for all departments. Resentment thrives, however, if salaries differ for similar positions among departments, or if promotions are seen to be biased. Again, you must be aware of these challenges and offer an environment in which interdepartmental communication can reach a new level of understanding about the judgments or assessments made in different departments. Mix up participants so that there is a cross-fertilization of information, ideas, and communication styles.

UPWARD VS. DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION

The hierarchy challenge can be one of the toughest in a workshop. The ego of a senior participant can be threatened if his or her weakness in a specific area of communication is highlighted in an activity. Unless a good relationship already exists between the parties, sparks may fly if a subordinate participating in the workshop excels in the senior's weak areas. Conversely, a subordinate may feel stymied in communication when a senior is present because he or she believes that information or ideas expressed could be received in a negative manner and used against the subordinate. Your role is to establish trust and openness and, if necessary, to discuss the situation individually with the appropriate participants.

The purpose of every workshop is to enhance communication so you must set the example and create environmental conditions up front so that a smooth flow of ideas can follow.

INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Many organizations require their employees to regard colleagues as clients and to communicate with them with courtesy and respect. This style creates positive synergy throughout the organization and participants from these en-

vironments may communicate with openness and directness in the workshop. You must recognize this competency and acknowledge it accordingly.

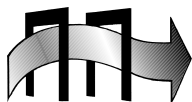
Participants who work for an organization that positions clients, consultants, and vendors above employees may bring tension and anxiety to the training session. It is important that you recognize this behavior and extend respect and deference to these participants to help them with communication growth. Through the use of effective communication techniques in the workshop, you will provide awareness and understanding of these differing communication styles and thus offer increased understanding for return to the workplace or, even better, new alternatives for improved communication at the participant's workplace.

Surveying Participants and Assessing Needs



Before you design the workshop it is essential that you get feedback from the participants about the topic you will cover in the training so you can develop and customize materials that will respond to the areas of need the employees identify. Handle the surveys in a manner that will ensure confidentiality. If you do so, it is likely that the feedback will be more open and honest.

The survey you design or develop should attempt to capture all types of workplace relationships (individual, teams, departments, and so on). All questions must be free of bias and should not “lead” the respondent to answer in a specific way. There is a sample survey you can use in chapter 11 (Assessment 11–2: Participant Survey and Needs Analysis). In addition, there are many good assessments available commercially. See the resources listed in the For Further Reading section, *Assessments A–Z*.



What to Do Next

- ♦ Consider the diversity in the organization where you'll present a training.
- ♦ Develop or select an employee survey to identify existing communication skills among potential participants.
- ♦ Define the diverse needs of your participants.
- ♦ Identify the various types of communication you will encounter among training participants.

- ♦ Plan ways to avoid problems inherent in dissimilar communication styles and comfort levels.



In chapter 3 you will discover the elements required to design your communication skills workshop. You will learn that it is vital to define the purpose and goals of the workshop from both the participants' and the employers' perspectives. Included also are straightforward ground rules for instructional design and techniques for structuring the learning environment.