

leadership instalments

Communication that Connects

By Dan Gaynor

COMMUNICATION IS WIDELY ACCEPTED AS AN IMPORTANT leadership skill; whenever people describe the things they think would improve their experience at work it always makes the top of the list. Why? Well, I like to focus on what I believe are the big powerful leadership dynamics. These are usually the simplest, and communication fits squarely into this category, so here it is: put simply, we talk to people we care about and we listen to people we care about. Leaders who communicate frequently and well send a message of caring. Leaders who do not, unwittingly send a very different message. Employees can't usually describe why they want more communication but they know how they feel with and without it.

With this installment we're going to look at the ways in which communication connects good leaders with their teams. To be effective communication must be understood, this is self-evident, but the best leaders also use it as a key tool to build stronger, more dedicated relationships. Here are four communication precepts to think about:

Simplify messages. Distill complex issues into simple clear themes. An early mentor of mine once told me that while most people think the ability to handle complexity is a sign of great thinking, it is actually the ability to distill complexity into simple clear themes that is the mark of brilliance. This is true of communication. Distilling complex situations into simple clear thoughts makes them accessible to the widest audience and this is powerful. If you love complexity as I once did, learn to see the beauty in simplicity - it's a much more powerful force.

Vocabulary also becomes important. Stick to simple clear language. Avoid words that might separate you from followers. Poor communicators love to demonstrate their vocabularies, it's all about ego and it distances them from the very people they should be connecting with. Some years ago I worked for a man who had an extraordinary vocabulary and he loved to showcase it. A great many well educated people didn't know what he was saying most of the time and he made them feel small. He created the impression he was arrogant. Never make the people you lead feel small.

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If someone does not know what you are talking about, it is your shortcoming not theirs. Leaders who don't adjust for their audience are often misunderstood and they alienate the very people they should be trying to reach. Communication should be an opportunity to draw people closer. Adjust your vocabulary to the group or individual you are with. People with more limited vocabularies are no less valuable, they can be among the brightest, most talented and motivated team members.

Strive for an economy of words. Take the time to prepare for each staff meeting. The key to good communication is not the writing, but the editing. I've watched too many people verbally edit as they speak until their audience is either completely confused or asleep. The time for editing is before rather than during the speaking.

And finally don't leave clarity to chance. Encourage others to ask questions when they don't understand, or when you have left a question unanswered. You'll send a message of caring and give people the information they need to get the job done.

Communication should be among your most important relationship building tools. Build the right habits and you will take one more step toward a more dedicated team.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about someone who loved to flaunt his or her vocabulary. How did it make you and others feel?
2. How frequently are you holding team updates?
3. Which of the four precepts do you think will improve your communication the most?

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