

The Message Sent is not Always the One Received (Jan 11)

By Marjorie Brody

You cannot *not* communicate. Whether you are face to face, on the phone, sending e-mails or text messaging, you are always conveying a message.

The ability to communicate effectively is a critical success factor for all professionals in every industry. According to a study done by Watson Wyatt, companies whose employees communicate effectively have a 19.4% higher market premium than companies that don't. It turns out that good communication is a soft skill that leads to hard business results.

The ultimate goal is that the message you send is the one that is received -- yet there are many factors that impact effective communications. Let's examine the actual communication process. You (the sender) have a message that you want to communicate -- information you want to convey to someone else (the receiver). It's up to you to decide how you're going to transmit that message, choosing which channel. Are you going to do it face to face, in writing (e-mail or texting) or by phone?

Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. Face-to-face communication can be time-consuming, expensive and logistically impossible. But certain news or information always should be delivered in person -- ie. firing someone, giving difficult feedback etc.

That being said, there are times where this is not always a hard and fast rule. When selecting which channel of communication to use, keep in mind that people have preferred ways of getting information. This may be based on learning style or convenience.

So it's always best to choose the mode of communication that your "receiver" prefers. Once you have selected the channel of communication, understand that the message you're sending needs to be decoded by the person who is receiving it.

There are many things that can impact a message and distort it. Let's examine eight of these factors.

1. Noise

Noise is both psychological and physical. Psychological noise includes things that we say to ourselves like, "Why do I need to be sitting here?"; "How does this relate to me?"; "I wonder if the kids got to school on time?"; and so on. Physical noise includes things like telephones ringing, traffic in the background, and sidebar conversations -- all of these sounds make it difficult to focus on the message.

2. Communication Signals

There are three aspects of communication signals -- visual, vocal and verbal cues. The first, visual signals, is very important when the communication is face-to-face or written. Of course, the visual element is also a factor when there are web cameras on computers.

During in-person encounters, we evaluate the message frequently -- not just on what is said, but what the person actually looks like. The first aspect of this visual "scoring" relates to the person's body language -- if any gestures and facial expressions are appropriate to the message, and whether he or she has a good stance and posture. Making eye contact is critical.

A person's grooming -- attention to the details like body odor (and cologne) -- is also important. Part of the visual package also relates to dress -- is the individual wearing appropriate wardrobe items that fit well? Is anything distracting from the message?

Research by Malcolm Gladwell, cited in his book *Blink*, shows that tall people, especially men, get more instant credibility. But we can go one step further and state straight out: Attractive people also gain more instant buy-in.

While you obviously can't change your height or gender, and short of expensive cosmetic surgery, can't really alter your looks, you need to ensure you look as good as you can, and carry yourself confidently.

Always ensure that your visual "package" is beyond reproach, so it is congruent with your message, and reflects your credibility. When visual communication is done via writing, our perceptions of people are based on whether their letter or e-mail is spelled correctly, whether they use proper punctuation, have good handwriting, use a pleasing font and with personal notes, even sometimes the paper quality itself.

Even when using PowerPoint during a presentation, if there is a typo, automatically some people will make a decision and change a perception based on that, or stop listening to the message.

Vocal signals in communication relate to the way your voice sounds.

How many times have you formed a perception of someone on the phone, but when you actually meet them you think or say, "You sure don't look like how you sound!"?

This comment is telling – and can be interpreted in a good or bad way.

A high and squeaky voice lacks power and credibility. Sloppy diction may make you sound sloppy overall. Using lots of "uhs" and "ums" while you speak gives the appearance of hesitancy. And, your tempo, whether too fast or too slow, can result in a label of rude and abrasiveness, or worse yet -- slow and dumb.

Remember, too, that regional dialects and accents can contribute to perceptions. So if you have received feedback from trusted friends and colleagues that yours may be holding you back, seek out a voice coach.

The last element of communication signals relates to verbal cues.

Here is where it's important to remember that the goal in communication is to connect, not necessarily to impress others. So, when people use \$100 words, "psychobabble," techno-speak, jargon, and spoken or written acronyms, they risk losing the connection. If people are so busy trying to figure out what you're saying and actually mean, the actual message can get lost. The use of tentative language ("I guess"; "I hope"; "sorta"; "maybe" and "kinda") also creates uncertainty.

3. Demographics

Like it or not, people make judgments based on age, gender and race. These factors can work for you, or against you. Clearly, they impact peoples' perception of you, hence impact the message.

Demographics are most important during face-to-face communication, since it's the first thing we see. For example, is someone being perceived as too young or too old to know what he/she is talking about? This certainly can impact effective communication. Always be aware of your own filters.

4. Learning Style

We all have a preferred way of taking in information. When we can give people information in the way that they like to receive it, the chances of effective communication are greater.

The three primary learning styles are: visual – people that like to see things; auditory -- people that like to hear the information; and kinesthetic – those that use the senses of touch, taste and feel.

When you adapt your style to the other person's or use multiple modalities when speaking to a group, the message you're sending is more accurately received.

5. Proximity

The closer we are to someone physically and psychologically, less confusion occurs. Physical proximity relates primarily with face-to-face communication. When you're physically closer, you can see more and

better. For example, if you are next to someone, he or she could see that your foot is tapping, which could indicate your impatience. There is less chance for misinterpretation or confusion over the message sent when all parties are physically closer to one another.

Psychologically, when you're on the same wave length as the other person, there is less room for confusion. When you know someone for awhile, you truly get to understand their nuances, and can better understand what they're saying and how your message is being received.

6. Behavioral Styles

Many behavioral styles studies have shown that people have primary and secondary ways of behaving. BRODY Professional Development uses the DISC assessment tool during its "Understanding Behavioral Styles" program. DISC, an acronym for Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness, relates to concepts developed by John Geier, from the 1928 work of psychologist William Moulton Marston.

So if someone's primary behavioral mode is a "high D," which is a dominant driver, they like to receive information by giving them the bottom line – straight talk. The minute you start doing a long analysis or speaking in a tentative manner, these types of people will grow impatient, and hence, not necessarily listen to the entire message.

An "I" is a person who is a "people person" and likes to talk. He or she is fun loving, and doesn't necessarily want -- or need to -- get right to the bottom line. Those identified as "S" are steady and risk averse, and are a little slower in pace. "C" are those critical thinkers, analytical people who need – and like – a lot of detail.

The goal, of course, is to present your information while understanding the person's style – even though it may be different than yours.

7. Position or Role

We tend to listen better to more senior people, those who have power or rank. Right or wrong, we often give these people more credibility.

So, for example, in many organizations, if an administrative assistant comes up with an idea to change a business process, it could be discounted as, "What does she know -- she's only an admin?" When, in fact, from her position, she may be the best qualified person to communicate this idea, because she sees the whole picture.

Never discount people based on their roles; or at least be aware of your own preconceptions of position or rank when communicating.

8. Three Motivators

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who many perceive to be the father of public speaking, rhetoric is "the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion."

The official definition of the noun rhetoric is "1: the art of speaking or writing effectively: as a: the study of principles and rules of composition formulated by critics of ancient times b: the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion."

Aristotle described three main forms of rhetoric: *Ethos*, *Logos*, and *Pathos*. These communication motivators can be translated into logic, emotion and credibility. It's critical that we understand our own hot buttons, so we can determine our reactions to the message being sent.

When sending messages, we also need to keep in mind how others respond. For example, the more analytical the receiver is, the more logos you should use. Never underestimate the power of emotion.

When people hit these emotional buttons, we may shut down, or not listen to the rest of the message. Of course, we are biased by the credibility (ethos) of the person giving the information, which may be based on position, rank, or past relationship.

Effective communication is tricky. There's no question a lot is involved, but it's something that's highly valued and can improve. According to the Watson Wyatt study, firms that communicate effectively are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement versus firms that communicate less effectively. Companies that are highly effective communicators are 20 percent more likely to report lower turnover rates than their peers.

So, in these highly volatile economic times, good communication truly can make a difference.

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