

Three Ways to Transmit Loud and Clear

By

Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

*The heart of a fool is in his mouth, but the mouth of a wise man is in his heart.
Benjamin Franklin*

How often have you said something that you thought was perfectly clear, only to find out later that the receiver had taken it in exactly the wrong way? A boss's ability to communicate well with direct reports depends on the capacity to transmit meaning between people through the use of words. These words give us the ability to represent the world through symbols, a skill that allows us to make sense of our world and then to share that meaning with others. However, the very words that empower us to create meaning with one another also create barriers between us. Words give us the means for sharing ideas and expressing emotion, but they can also serve as a source of conflict. Intentionally or unintentionally, words can cause roadblocks to understanding.

One of the reasons for these barriers is, even though meaning is not in words, we act as though it is. Just because a thought makes perfect sense in our heads doesn't, in any way, imply that anyone else will understand that idea in exactly the same way we do. There are no guarantees that communication will ever occur in the way we intend it to, but there are some things bosses can do to try to direct the conversation:

1. Use Specific Language

First, use *concrete* rather than *abstract* words. Most of us find abstract words unclear because they are broad in scope. Abstract words tend to lump things together, ignoring uniqueness or even subtle differences. Abstract words describe things that cannot be detected through one of the five senses. Because these words are vague and nonspecific, they encourage generalizations and stereotyping.

Concrete language, on the other hand, offers specificity. Concrete words frequently describe things we can perceive by using one of the five senses or things we describe in behavioral terms. They clarify the sender's meaning by narrowing the number of possibilities. Using concrete words, therefore, tends to decrease the likelihood of misunderstanding.

For example, I recently worked with the owner of a grocery store chain who had decided he wanted to give his store managers some feedback about the conditions of the stores. I asked him what he would like to see changed, and he said “the environment of the stores.” (Notice the abstract word in this sentence is “environment.”) I told him that, in my perceptions of an improved store environment, he wanted the store windows to be clean, the aisles to be clean, and the store, even near the fish counter, to smell nice. I mentioned these things because those are the things I notice first about a grocery store. He said, no, none of those things had occurred to him at all. He was talking about the way they display boxes of merchandise on the shelves. He likes them to be even on the top. I told him I had honestly never noticed or cared whether the boxes lined up.

Here we were, two native speakers, supposedly speaking the same language, and we couldn’t understand one another. So, to help him craft a more concrete message, I asked him the pivotal question, “If I were following you into the store, what would I see? Smell? Hear?” This helped him pinpoint what he wanted to say.

Similarly, I often work with bosses who want to talk to direct reports about their attitude or communication style. I ask, “If they changed in ways that you wanted them to, and I were following them around, what change would I notice?” This crucial question will help make your words more specific and concrete. How do you know if someone has a better attitude? Does that person smile more? Say hello to more customers? Come out into the store more often? The more specific you can be, the more likely others will understand you.

2. Send Nonjudgmental Messages

Descriptive words are one of the best ways bosses can make sure they stress observable, external, objective reality. These words focus the receiver’s attention on the *thing* or *action* being described rather than on the boss’s personal reaction or opinion. Conversely, judgmental words show evaluation and stress personal reactions. They are words that direct the receiver’s attention to the emotion rather than to the description of the event. This often engenders a defensive response in the receiver because judgmental words tend to be vague and abstract. They annoy people.

“You” oriented speech, a particular kind of judgmental language, tends to focus on the receiver and often implies blame. Whether we state the evaluation outright or merely imply it, the receiver often reacts defensively. “I” language, on the other hand, shows ownership of

reactions and reduces the likelihood that the hearer will react defensively. Notice the difference between these two:

You misunderstood.

I haven't made myself clear.

The former assigns the blame for the communication breakdown on the listener, while the latter indicates that the fault lies with the speaker. Even though this may seem like a small thing, over time, judgmental language starts to feel like an attack, and its continued use stands in the way of building rapport.

To use descriptive, concrete language begin sentences with "The problem is...." Notice the difference in these two messages:

You aren't showing much consideration to your coworkers when you come in late.

The problem is, others have to assume your responsibilities
when you don't get here on time.

The first lets the direct report know there is a problem, but the defensive reaction may erase any willingness to find out more about how to be more considerate. In the second example, the person knows exactly what the problem is, and a solution emerges.

Another way to avoid defensive reactions is to try to use more unrestrictive words and fewer restrictive ones. Restrictive words attempt to control or restrict the actions of others. Consciously or unconsciously a sender's use of restrictive words implies that the receiver must express agreement. Using words like "should," "must," "always," and "never" can cause the listener to react defensively. Unrestrictive words offer a less rigid orientation. They suggest rather than demand conformity. "Maybe," "might," and "could," offer options without being aggressive. Also, using unrestrictive language shows more respect for the direct report.

3. Stick to the Facts

Inferences provide another source of problems in communication situations, largely because the speaker treats the inferences like facts. Statements of fact are confined to what one observes. Therefore, statements of fact cannot be made about the future. Inferences go beyond what a person sees and may concern the past, present, or future. Facts have a high probability of being accurate; inferences represent only some modest and debatable degree of probability.

Most importantly, facts bring people together; inferences, like judgment, create distance and cause disagreements.

To illustrate the point, think of the last really heated argument you had with someone. How many statements of fact did you or the other person actually articulate? One? Two? If it turned into a heated argument, chances are the exchange was riddled with judgments and inferences. Since facts tend to foster agreement, facts seldom surface in these kinds of arguments.

Conclusion

Effective communication is at the heart of all human activity. Bosses who excel in it also take great strides in developing their people and keeping the stars in the organization. Increasingly, an organization's competitive advantage depends on people, especially on creative, innovative people. Successful organizations must develop, sustain, and market high levels of innovation throughout their infrastructures if they want to attain or maintain industry leadership. To encourage the pace of this sort of initiative, leaders can no longer rely on a few key individuals to develop creative solutions. Instead, bosses who want to attract, retain, and develop a pool of talented thinkers must know ways to encourage each person's contributions. More effective communication provides that way. So, when you say, "I want a word with you," make sure it's the right word delivered in the right way—specific, nonjudgmental, and factual.

Dr. Linda Henman helps CEOs and boards of directors plan succession, set strategies, and manage talent. She can be reached at Linda@henmanperformancegroup.com.