

Leadership

In this section:

- Leadership through communication
- Information overload

L eadership through communication

Fundamental to every manager's artillery of skills must be the ability to communicate effectively - both with themselves and with others. However, it is an aptitude that few managers and leaders master successfully.



We communicate every minute of the day, even when we are not speaking. We communicate by the way we present ourselves, express our personality and demonstrate our spirit in response to the world around us. The way we communicate not only says a great deal about who we are, but also about how we think and behave.

This is obviously largely attributed to how we have been brought up. Yet, we each have a choice about how much we control and determine who we are and how we portray ourselves to the world, as opposed to how much we let circumstance determine this.

Says Jill Hamlyn, MD of The People Business Group of Companies and an international executive personal coach, "We define ourselves in relation to the people and events around us, and create ourselves through the words and actions that we use. There is a grand narrative that runs through all our lives."

Know and understand yourself first

To communicate effectively we need to start by knowing and understanding ourselves intimately. "Good communication starts by realising a self-awareness and positive self-belief from within," continues Hamlyn. "We need to have a firm grasp of our values and beliefs, and our own sense of identity, not that determined only by our

experiences and other people."

Our thinking forms the basis of communication with ourselves. How we process and organise our thoughts internally develops the messages that we express externally. However, today we have very little time and space to think and process information. Stress also has an enormous impact on our lives and mental response mechanism.

This limits us from effectively translating our thoughts into appropriate physical responses and linguistic expression. The result is that our communication is often reactive and confused.

So just how do we say what we mean and mean what we say?

Language, or the more scientific term, linguistics, is key to our understanding of each other. Naturally, people worldwide have different forms, types and levels of language, different styles of expression, speaking and writing, with tone, context and semantics playing an influential role in how language is used. Generally unaware that these and other aspects of our psycho-intellectual frame of reference influence our way of communicating, we think we are saying what we mean and others will interpret our communication as such.

But we don't realise that others may, in fact, interpret what we say completely differently to what we are trying to get across. If we are in control of what and how we convey information, then we are likely to be successful in achieving the desired impact of our communication - and consequently the desired influence on others.

Communication the critical enabler

"We communicate through what we verbalise and, sometimes, through what we do not actually articulate. It is to our

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advantage to be able to communicate ourselves authentically in all situations, to say what we mean and mean what we say," adds Hamlyn.

Management in organisations needs to play a dual role as both credible communicators demonstrating strong leadership, while also "uplifting communication to increase understanding" at all levels. While the old adage may be "what can't be measured, can't be managed", today's reality is what can't be understood, can't be managed. Organisations are primarily about people, not just about profits and products or services.

"As understanding people is the key to effective leadership and management, communication is the critical enabler," comments Hamlyn.

Good communication is vital to building relationships, improving morale and boosting performance both within and outside organisations. The role of managers is essentially to get the most out of the people with whom they work. However, many managers are not only impeded by limitations in self-expression and the technical use of language, but they also often lack the emotional intelligence to say what is appropriate in a given situation.

Managers need to develop their levels of intuition and sensibility to create an environment of trust and transparency with their colleagues and associates. This will also help them to develop a positive rapport and engender respect from their subordinates. They will more likely rely on them as their primary channel of information about the organisation's business versus resorting to informal sources such as the "grapevine" or other external sources such as the media. (It is a prevalent reality that employees of organisations are more likely to learn about key developments in their organisations from the press than from their own internal communication channels.)

How can we be sure that others are getting the message?

Being able to compose and convey the messages that we want people around us to receive is a skill, and requires continuous and dedicated development. It also requires self-confidence, time and opportunity for reflective space in our busy lives. This can be achieved largely through disciplines gained from effective development.

Continues Hamlyn, "As we cannot give to others what we as individuals do not possess, the quest for raising our self-esteem and self-knowledge is, therefore, highly advantageous to both ourselves and those around us. By raising our self-awareness, we then raise our understanding and competencies, which are reflected in the range of choices that we make in both the content of our conversation and our use of language. This heightened communication ability is a direct representation of our leadership and management style."

The common error within organisations is that top management seldom regards communication as its responsibility. They leave this function to Corporate or Brand Communications or Internal Affairs (whichever

name seems to be preferred by the organisation) or even an external consultant. While executive managers cannot be reasonably tasked with developing content for all their communication, management must take responsibility and ownership of the messages they communicate. If they do not, it will reveal a weakness in their leadership ability.

Management must thus work closely with their communications professionals to ensure that their messages are not only consistent with what they want to convey, but that they are also continuously in line with their organisation's strategy, brand, culture and values. Improving communication from the top down, so staff have a current understanding of ongoing business developments in their environments, alleviates pressure on employees and goes a long way to avoid discord in the workplace. This further facilitates a more efficient and effective organisation.

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Managers and leaders, in particular, also need to develop the ability to communicate with insight, impact and influence. They need to gain an understanding of their audience, irrespective of the dynamics. Being in touch and in tune with what employees, customers and shareholders need to know, and having the ability to respond with appropriate information at the right time, will bode well for business and create competitive advantage for an organisation. The ability to communicate with conviction and authority will inspire and instil confidence within an organisation's target audience, and will influence productivity, performance and profits.

Making the message mantra

Successful leaders are influential people who demonstrate absolute conviction of purpose yet have compassion, humility and understanding of others. The key is self-understanding, and raising the maturity levels that enable them to cope with a wide array of personalities and egos. An ability to develop synergy between true identity and how they communicate with the world around them is the simple test. Those who can master this, and live their own message through what they say and do, thus raise their mastery of communication, which is the primary and most fundamental skill in becoming an excellent leader.

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