



COMMUNICATION NOT AN ILLUSION

In the words of George Bernard Shaw, “The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.” But what makes communication effective as opposed to delusional? Experts warn that failing to manage and develop effective communication skills could severely impact the longevity of a business.

BY LISA MINIKAS

COMMUNICATION lays the foundations for almost all of our personal and business transactions – employer to employee, business-to-business and business to consumer. And, while most of us are born with a pair of ears and a mouth, there's much more to this complicated process than speak, hear and do.

According to the 2005/2006 Watson Wyatt Communication ROI Study, companies which communicate efficiently have a 19.4 per cent higher market premium, higher shareholder return and lower turnover of staff than those that do not.

While the US research is reflective of large corporations, local speech pathologist Gail Rogers said small business could learn a lot from examining the behaviour of bigger players.

"In business, communication is agenda driven and objective. You want to achieve a positive outcome for both parties and no one can afford to make assumptions."

"Communication is an integral part of any and every business and doing it effectively is without doubt a real profit generator," she said.

Regardless of industry or occupation, sending and receiving messages is a key ingredient in business, but Ms Rogers believes many have forgotten there is more to it than speak and be heard.

"Communication is about sending or receiving a message clearly without any interference," she said.

"From the moment we wake up, our day's issues, agendas and triumphs all revolve around communication."

Interference or noise between the sender and receiver of a message may contribute to communication breakdown, and Ms Rogers said it paid to remember communication was a two-way street.

"There's always more than one person involved in communication and in order for a message to be received clearly, it has to be interpreted or perceived in the intended way," she said. "Pre-existing thoughts or perceptions, background information and anticipation can all inhibit a message - effort is required from both parties."

Wanting to be an effective communicator is a lot like taking a defensive driving course – you learn how to think for other people and, while road safety could save your life, effective communication could save your livelihood.



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Through positive language, enthusiasm and motivation, Ms Rogers believes profit will increase alongside customer satisfaction, productivity and employee retention.

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Verbal and non-verbal communication consists of pitch, projection, intonation, rhythm, gesture, facial expression and cognitive factors such as anticipation, judgements and beliefs. The other critical element is listening.

A person's ability to concentrate may be continually tested by the increased pace of daily activity and lifestyle, but open ears could make all the difference when it comes to selling a product, service or plight.

"In all business transactions, particularly sales, listening skills are crucial. You cannot assume you know what the client wants, only listen to what they tell you."

"100 per cent concentration is extremely difficult for people today – we shouldn't be multi-tasking, it is not productive."

But our busy working lives and the rise of electronic communication and technological convergence has encouraged just that with email

and SMS now a popular way to send and receive messages.

"Emails in particular are very reactive – we rush to send them off and as a result, there's a greater chance that our message could be misinterpreted," Ms Rogers said. "I've sent emails to my mum and dad which were taken out of context, and they know me extremely well. Imagine what it's like in the corporate world where you are frequently communicating with people you are not familiar with."

Similarly, Paul Hodgson, a director at People Logic, believes although electronic communication is convenient and timely, it is not without its pitfalls.

"Email is only in an early stage of development but I am continually surprised at how many businesses continue to get it wrong – their communications policies are ineffective and badly organised rather than centralised and moderated," he said.

Mr Hodgson takes an all-encompassing view of business communication and suggests companies that fail to implement an effective communication strategy run the risk of corroding their entire brand image.

"Communications policies should be apparent within every organisation – there needs to be a specific format standardised throughout every element of business to create that sense of brand identity," he said. ▸

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"Any communication a company undertakes becomes their name - their service, the look and design of their marketing collateral, their website, staff meetings or pitches to clients - and if it is all cohesive, a very small company can make a very large impression." While the appeal of online communication between employer, employee, client and stakeholder grows as a communication strategy of choice, Mr Hodgson said sometimes traditional face-to-face methods were best.

"I don't see this as having an expiry date - shaking hands and sitting down at a meeting is really what business is about," he said.



COMMUNICATION INHIBITORS

Gail Rogers, a speech pathologist at Cairns Speech Pathology Clinic said while people communicated differently, there were several distinct roadblocks which created communication problems across the board:

1. Criticising
2. Name calling
3. Diagnosing / judging
4. Over praising
5. Ordering / commanding
6. Threats
7. Excessive questioning
8. Giving unwanted advice
9. Diverting conversation to personal needs
10. Providing logical arguments
11. Providing reassurance
12. Telling people they were road blocking

Are you an effective communicator?

Becoming self-aware is the first step to assessing your ability as an effective communicator. Cairns Speech Pathology suggest those interested should record themselves speaking publically, chairing a meeting or simply talking to a member of staff. You may discover some confronting habits, but at least you're not living an illusion. □

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