

Effective Communications

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Effective Communication between employees is imperative for efficient handling of the business affairs of a company. I would like to share some of my experience in trying to improve communications within my company. One of the specific things I've been doing is to try to help our people do a better job of communicating in writing. I have conducted over 60 three-day workshops for about 800 of our people during the past five or six years on the subject of more Effective Writing. I am pleased to say I can see some small amount of improvement.

Another project I've been connected with in my company during the past three years is a one-week program for supervisors in which we are attempting to help improve all types of communications. I feel that we have been making some significant progress, but at the same time I am not trying to kid myself into believing the we have all the problems solved. However, we are pleased with some of our minor victories.

We keep plugging away at it because more and more I am firmly convinced that poor communications is the root of about 99-9/10 per cent of all our problems — yours and mine — and everybody's.

Communications is the very life blood of our whole being and existence. How good it is, or how poor it is determines the consequence of people in every activity throughout the world.

The story of communications is the story of our civilization. From the beginning of time and down through the countless centuries, the success or failure of men and nations has largely depended on communications.

The pages of history are full of implications of what might have been if communications had not worked either well or poorly in many crucial instances. Think for a moment of the consequences of this nation had not Paul Revere communicated effectively one April night almost 200 years ago.

Consider the difference there might have been in Christianity and the world today if 2,000 years ago the Apostle Paul had not been moved to

make his journeys throughout the ancient world to communicate the true word.

In our modern world today we have some of the most ingenious devices for communicating that the minds of men could devise. Look at Telstar for instance. And, we are on the threshold of even more dramatic and efficient ways to communicate.

Yet the fact remains the communications is still one of our major problems. In business and industry today, poor communications continue to take a tremendous toll on our efficiency. We are guilty of poor communications and the people we deal with are guilty of poor communications.

So we go on and on, practically starving for lack of better communications amidst what seems to be an over-abundance of facilities that we could use.

When you look for the answer to this seeming paradox, I guess we will all have to agree that the problem is tied pretty closely to the fact that we are all human beings and are all subject to human frailties. The failure to communicate properly in the last analysis is a human failure.

So in order for us to get a better picture of some of the problems involved in communications and to develop a greater understanding of our responsibilities for improving communications, let's look at some of these human failures. Let's see if we can do something about the barriers to communications.

Let me approach it this way: Almost everything in the world starts with an idea. But it's not long before an idea must be shared. Perhaps in your work your supervisor must be sold that the idea is good; or perhaps subordinates must be told what to do to make the idea work. Although business is built on ideas, and idea doesn't do your business or mine a bit of good until it is turned into action.

That's obvious, nothing new. But, people will not buy, or sell, or follow orders, or work at anything efficiently and effectively unless they know what they are doing and why. Communications is essential to action—and a communication is based on understanding.

This is the reason for communicating. People MUST understand. But, at the same time, this is the big hitch: People don't understand automatically.

What do we do to try to get people to understand us? Well, we do several things. First of all, we use words.

We have also created short cuts and improvements of words. We use symbols. We use pictures in place of words; we use graphs, charts and sketches, codes, imagery and many other symbols to help us communicate.

And we also use physical expressions to help our communications. We convey the meaning through our facial expressions; the attitude and position of our bodies, our tone of voice, our gestures and other physical expressions of feeling.

These are our three major forms of communications: Words, symbols, physical expressions. These are by no means the only way we communicate, but they are the major and most common ways.

Let's add "Other" to our list just to take care of some of the many other forms of communicating, such as smell, taste, touch, and so forth.

So far, this looks simple and free from problems. We get ideas and we want action, so we Communicate. To make ourselves understood, we use words, symbols, physicals. expressions and some other means of communicating. Why then is communicating sometimes so difficult?

The reason people don't often understand are very similar. In communicating with one another:

- (1) People, you and I included, often Jump to Conclusions.
- (2) People, you and I included, Frequently, Close Our Minds.
- (3) People, you and I included, Frequently Listen Only To Words, instead of trying to see things from other person's point of view.

These are the three most common barriers to effective communications. Let's discuss these one at a time and try to understand them better. The first barrier is Jumping To Conclusions.

We all do this from time to time. We interpret something we see or hear, assume that it is fact, and act. Here's an illustration.

Three elderly sisters, famous for their charities, were left \$300 by a local citizen who passed away. One immediately sent her \$100 to the Red

Cross. The second sister sent \$50 to the March of Dimes and \$50 to the Concer Fund. The third sister, however, met a shabbily dressed man on the street and impulsively pressed the \$100 into his thin and tembling hand. She smiled warmly and whispered, "Godspeed." The next day the shabbily dressed man knocked" at the door of the sisters' home. "Do you want to see me?" asked the third sister.

"Yeah, lady," said the man, "Here's your 700. Godspeed came first and paid 7" to 1."

Don't you wish you could be so fortunate? Most jokes and puzzlers rely on our human tendency to jump to conclusions. Unfortunately that tendency doesn't always result in amusement.

When the ship, Titanic sank in 1912, a passenger on a nearby ship saw the Titanic's distress flares, but wasn't concerned because he assumed that they were fireworks and that they were part of a celebration.

Let's take a closer look at the second of our major barriers to communications: Closed Minds.

Let me illustrate what I mean by telling you about an experiment that was done with some fish—just some simple fish—some minnows and a pipe.

Now those of you who are fishermen know that minnows are the natural food of pike. So, although the minnows and the pike were put in the same tank, they were separated by a glass partition. The pike could see the minnows all right, and he was hungry. He hadn't been fed anything. Now, of course, the pike tried to get at the minnows. He kept smacking his nose against the glass partition. He was hungry and there was his food. But everytime he tried to get it he smacked his nose and got nothing. He did this hundreds of times before he gave up. But, he did give up. He learned something. Even the nervous system of a fish can learn something. And What he learned was "Don't eat those minnows."

Now at this point the glass partition was removed. The minnows and the pike now swam freely together, even bumping into each other. What do you suppose the pike's behavior was now? Do you think he tried to eat minnows,

Well, he didn't. He didn't touch them. The pike had learned a lesson. "Don't eat those minnows." And the pike, surrounded by an abundance of his natural food, died of starvation. He knew what he knew, and he died with that knowledge.

Men have a more highly developed nervous system than fish, so we might expect a more adequate kind of behavior than that. But people often demonstrate the same kind of evaluation. The sinking of the Titanic offers an example of just this sort of behavior. The publicity about famous ship's being "unsinkable" was so effective that people believed it . . . too well. Even seamen who heard the Titanic's SOS refused to believe the ship was in trouble because they KNEW it was unsinkable.

Now let's take a look at the third barrier to effective communications: Listing Only To Words.

Words create problems. Words may mean entirely different things to different people. For example, take the word "drill."

To an Oil Man—it means looking for oil.

To a Carpenter—boring holes in wood.

To an Army Sergeant—training soldiers.

To a School Teacher— Multiplication tables.

To a Farmer—sowing a crop.

"Dissolved" to a television program director is not the "dissolve" that a chemist thinks about, even though both involve some sort of change in appearance. What is "Work" to a foreman is not necessarily "work" at all to an employee.

These are just a few examples. Our language is full of words that may have entirely different meanings to different people.

Even when two people feel that they are using the same general meaning for words, the picture or image the the words call to mind may differ.

For example, if I say I'm thinking of an oven in a cooking stove in a typical American home kitchen, I doubt that you would misinterpret my meaning. But, visualize the picture that the words create in your mind. Is the stove gas-fired or electric? Is the oven eye-level, or is it the stoop, squat and squint level? Or is it built into the wall as independent unit? It is white, pink, green, or some other color?

Suppose I say, "Desk." Suppose I talk about my desk in my office. You probably know what I Mean. But, is it a metal or an oak desk? Does it have a glass plate on top or not? Is it covered with books and papers, or is it bare? Do you visualize a chair with it, or is there no chair there?

Even though we attach a similar meaning to words, you and I never mean exactly the same thing when we use the same words.

Another problem with words is that meanings change.

For example, young people often come up with new meanings for old words: keen, cool, sharp, gone, cat, square. We can probably make an almost endless list if we would listen to a few members of the modern generation.

Time has brought about new words and new meanings. And these changes have occurred everywhere. So we must not only acquire new words, but new meanings for old words.

When one man talks to another, the listener must do more than listen to the words. He must try to get the viewpoint of the person who is speaking. That means that he must look beyond the words for the speaker's meaning.

When one man talks to another, the listener usually hears the words and puts his own meaning into them. The listener does not necessarily listen to what was said as the first man meant it. He processes the speaker's words through his own psychological filters so that what actually registers on the listener's mind is what he wants to hear. So if there is to be true communication, the listener must go back to the speaker to be sure he is understanding the same meaning the speaker meant to convey.

How does this going back process take place. Undoubtedly, it requires a fairly open mind. Perhaps to avoid jumping to conclusions, the listener starts with questions: "This is what I thought I heard you say. Have I heard right?"

Sometimes the listener may completely understand. In some cases where a man knows his job well, all you need to do is tell him to start it and he knows exactly what to do. However, when there may be doubt, jobs may be done incorrectly, or we may get into a lot of trouble unless we stop and go back and make sure that both parties understand what's going on well enough to get the job done right.

One of the biggest errors most everyone makes is to take for granted that others understand what he says. This is a very risky business at best because people, you and I included, tend to listen for only those things we want to hear and our emotional make-up causes us to filter out everything except what will bolster our own views.

One social scientist says that people can be counted on to act only when they expect to gain something by it. I think the supervisor who is having problems in getting through to his people might stop to ponder this statement. A great number of supervisors tend to speak an entirely

different language from their subordinates. They speak in a language of production and efficiency. They talk to their subordinates in terms of organizing, directing, planning, coordinating and controlling.

The subordinate on the other hand is listening in terms of "What's in it for me?" He is listening in the language of personal motivation. He is listening for something that he can decode into personal opportunity, personal recognition, into belonging, and into security, both financial and emotional security.

So before the supervisor can do an effective job of communicating with subordinates, he has to

know who they are, what they are, what they do and want in life . . . In what ways do their attitudes, opinions, beliefs and actions affect their work.

The person who is the last analysis must get his job done through people must realize all these complicating factors involved in the very difficult and complex, but after all rewarding, task of good communications.

Only after he understands the dimensions of the problem can he do something about it. Once he has begun to master the art of good communications, he can start to enjoy the tremendous rewards that it offers.