Ten Tips for Improving Your Team Communication

By Sandra Wiley

Communication is something we do reflexively—like breathing. We talk to our spouses, children, and friends without giving much thought to how we are doing it. So, why do our firm-wide employee surveys consistently tell us that we need to improve communication among partners, managers, and staff? The primary reason is that business communication takes quite a bit of finesse. Choosing the right words, listening with our minds instead of just our ears, and getting our message across are skills that we all need to work on daily. At home and in social settings, miscommunication can lead to arguments. In the firm, the repercussions can be far more serious. Poor productivity, unmotivated employees, and even lawsuits can result from communication breakdowns in the office.

To improve communication within your team, and throughout the entire firm, you need to implement easy, but important, changes to your everyday culture. The following 10 tips will improve communication that can ultimately lead to improved motivation, productivity, and profitability:

1. handle conflicts with diplomacy;
2. revive the great lost art of conversation;
3. respect cultural differences;
4. provide good feedback;
5. give employees what they want;
6. trust your people;
7. make employees feel like owners;
8. take your emotions out of the equation;
9. don’t just hear—really listen; and
10. make work fun.

Handle conflicts with diplomacy. Put a group of different personalities in the same room for eight hours a day, five days a week—then, add the stress of multiple deadlines—and you’ve got a recipe for conflict. No matter how well intentioned and intellectually compatible the team is, it is inevitable that some conflicts will occur over trivial matters. Most minor issues will blow over quickly, but a few can turn into major disputes. Some office arguments can become serious enough to prompt legal action. To prevent small conflicts from exploding into major crises, deal with disputes right away. Let employees know from the start that your door is always open. Encourage employees to come to you by creating a safe environment in which they feel comfortable voicing their frustrations both honestly and openly. All conversations held in your office should remain completely confidential. When you respond to conflicts, do so with an open mind and a nonjudgmental approach. That means absolutely no personal attacks. You can help the two parties reach a resolution that is acceptable to everyone if you ask questions and really listen to the responses so you understand how each person in the dispute feels. Finally, if firm policy is to blame for the issues, consider making changes to the overall policy.

Revive the great lost art of conversation. Since the late 1990s, firms have become dependent on email as their primary form of communication with outside clients and colleagues. They even prefer email for internal communications (which means employees sitting a cubicle-length apart are writing to, vs. talking to, one another). We have become so reliant on our computers and iPhones that we have neglected the art of conversation. Technology is wonderful for improving speed, but it can have a detrimental effect on personal relationships. How many times have you sent an email with the best intentions, only to have its message misconstrued by the recipient? A short response sent in haste can easily be misinterpreted as careless—or worse, as a sign that you are angry. The majority of meaning construed in face-to-face conversations comes not from the words themselves, but from the speaker’s facial expressions and body language. Take gestures and smiles out of the equation, and recipients can easily get the wrong idea, especially when the sender isn’t the most articulate writer. There is a cure for technology overload. Pick up the phone once in a while and make a call. Better yet, take a walk around the office and talk to your team face to face.

Respect cultural differences. In 1992, while touring Australia, former President George H.W. Bush flashed the peace sign to some farmers. What he did not real-
satisfy the need to bond by creating a firm culture that is based on mutual respect and support. Instead of making staff members compete against one another—which creates a cutthroat environment in which people willingly step on their co-workers to get ahead—reward employees as a team to encourage camaraderie. To satisfy the third need, you must have transparency. The firm’s goals and the employee’s responsibilities should be obvious from the moment a new person is hired. Everyone’s job should be very clearly delineated, and each employee should understand how his or her individual piece fits into the bigger picture. Finally, employees should be recognized for every contribution they make to your organization. Whether that reward comes in the form of a promotion, salary increases, or just a round of applause at a firm staff meeting, it is still recognition.

**Trust your people.** We have all had at least one micro-manager at some point in our careers. This meddlesome person is like a shadow, hanging around each person’s desk to make the work is turned in on time. You did not hire a group of complete idiots. You hired people with the skills and intelligence to get the job done, so there is no need for you to hover over them. When staff members feel as though they have control over their jobs, they feel a sense of purpose and are more invested in the entire process. Autonomy breeds innovation and job satisfaction. Babysitting, on the other hand, makes employees feel as though the firm does not consider them competent enough to do their jobs. They feel insecure and unmotivated. Provide your workers with the tools needed to get the job done, and then give them the freedom to do it. To keep updated on their progress without meddling or micromanaging, hold weekly status meetings or ask for regular email progress reports—then back off.

**Make employees feel like owners.** Software giant SAS ranks at the very top of Fortune magazine’s “Best Companies to Work For” list, and with good reason. Not only does the company offer a bounty of perks (e.g., top-notch health insurance, state-of-the-art fitness center, and unlimited sick days), but SAS has also built a foundation based on trust between its employees and the manage-
ment. Great companies built on trust actually listen to their employees. Some of the best firms in the country have ongoing focus groups for their teams to elicit new ideas. Other firms have implemented programs to reward staff for new and innovative ideas. Transparency is another important part of employee ownership. That means partner groups don’t keep secrets. We need to spend more time listening and sharing and less time figuring out how to keep what we say behind closed doors. How can a firm succeed when it relinquishes so much control? Because motivated staff members produce real results.

**Take your emotions out of the equation.** You try to promote professionalism at the office, but that is not always easy to do when so many different personalities converge in such a small space. Sometimes work discussions can turn into personal attacks. When an employee is starting to get under your skin, take your emotions out of the equation. Instead, take a deep breath, count to 10, and respond in a calm, unemotional manner. When you do respond, don’t make it personal. For example, instead of saying, “You did a terrible job on that audit,” consider saying, “Here are a few points I think you need to work on to improve the process and the deliverable for audits in the future.” Also, make sure the person on the receiving end isn’t taking your comments the wrong way. We all view the world within our own emotional framework. No matter how innocent your intentions, they can be misconstrued. Ask for clarification at the end of conversations to make sure you and your employee are on the same page. You might say, “My intention in talking about your recent absences is to make sure everything is okay with your job and your health, and to see what we can do better to improve the situation.” The key is collaborative conversation.

**Don’t just hear—really listen.** You have conversations with your employees all day long. But, are you really listening? Here is a little clue: If you are thinking ahead to the next meeting or planning tonight’s dinner during the conversation, you are not paying attention. Being an effective communicator means listening as well as talking. Sounds easy, but listening actually takes some practice. Each time you have a conversation, pretend there is going to be a quiz at the end of it. Try to keep a mental checklist of all the important points the other person makes. When the conversation is over, force yourself to recall at least three important things the person said. Get in the habit of doing this until listening becomes second nature. One helpful way to improve your listening skills is to repeat what the other person has said. For example, you can say something like, “I understand that you are not happy with the current health insurance policy. I am going to look into it.” This technique offers the added bonus of showing your employees that you are interested in what they have to say.

**Make work fun.** Who said an office job has to be drudgery? It does not matter whether you are Zappos or a public accounting firm, the work day can be as fun and exciting as your company wants to make it. When the economy was thriving and clients were plentiful, many firms were offering massages, lunches, afternoons off, and free health club memberships. Although some firms have backed off on these initiatives, there are still plenty of things you can do to create a fun and energetic workplace. You do not have to come up with these kinds of creative ideas yourself. Your team can come up with lots of ideas for the firm’s consideration. Form a task force to brainstorm ways to incorporate a little fun in your day-to-day operations. Giving employees as little as 15 minutes a day to cut loose can make them much more appreciative and productive in their daily tasks.

Motivation, productivity, and profitability are all intuitively linked together through communication. With an intentional effort by all and a review of key techniques in good communication, your firm can ensure success through improved interaction and communication. Now go out there and have some fun!!!

**About the author:** Sandra Wiley, COO & Shareholder, is ranked by ACCOUNTING TODAY as one of the 100 most influential people in accounting as a result of her prominent role as an industry expert on HR and training, as well as influence as a management and planning consultant. Sandra is a certified Kolbe™ trainer who advises firms on building balanced teams, managing employee conflict, and hiring staff.

Sandra directs Boomer Consulting, Inc.’s annual Talent Development Advantage and offers her services as co-director of the Performance™ Academy Program as well as the CEO Advantage. She has been in the Strategic Coach Entrepreneurial Team Program™ for over 10 years and is responsible for communicating its concepts to clients and the Boomer staff.

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