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Leadership for Today Effective Group Communication

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Within a given day, human beings rely on the ability to communicate as a means of transferring information. Whether we speak, listen, write notes or letters, email, or text message, the process of communicating thoughts, ideas, and feelings is something we find to be important but typically give little thought to.

In organized group situations, the art of good communication helps build trust and respect. It fosters a positive learning environment and can set the stage for the group to achieve its identified mission, vision, and goals. In any group setting, members may share a common interest and commitment, yet also may see things from a variety of perspectives. Effective communication is one means for a group of diverse individuals to share ideas, construct solutions, and make appropriate decisions.

We send a variety of messages on a constant basis—including those messages we intend to send, those we actually send, messages a listener thinks he/she heard, responses from a listener based on what they think they heard, and our response to that response. When it comes to communication, there is a lot for a person to recall, and recall is key to effective communication. Research has shown that people generally remember:

- 10% of what they read
- 20% of what they hear
- 30% of what they see
- 50% of what they hear and see
- 70% of what they say and write
- 90% of what they say as they do something

Communication consists of two basic skills: *listening* and *speaking*. But today's hectic pace of life can make this two-way communication difficult. Unless care is given to the communication process, the probability that things may "go wrong" in our daily communication with others

is high. In fact, communication should always begin with listening rather than speaking, thus reinforcing the golden rule: "Listen to understand. Speak to clarify." Such *active listening* is the most important form of communication that can be utilized by members of a group, and it is a skill that requires patience, practice, and concentration. For effective active listening, we need to listen without judging, and then provide feedback that fosters the opportunity to learn, observe, and connect with the speaker.

THE CONVERSATIONAL FEEDBACK PROCESS

Providing feedback is a crucial step in becoming a better listener. It allows us, as listeners, to frame our speaking (feedback) so that we can ask good questions, find additional information, and provide a better response—thus making us better at communication.

1. Acknowledge the thoughts, ideas, or feelings of the speaker. These are actions you take to let the listener know you are paying attention. Practice communication skills like leaning towards the speaker, nodding your head, or making comments like "I see." These actions let the speaker know that you are focused on both them and the ideas they are communicating.

Example acknowledgements: "Tell me more." Or "That sounds interesting. Please go on."

2. Use "I" Messages. An "I" message allows us to communicate or react to information without placing blame or judgment upon either the person speaking or the identified situation. An "I" message describes a listener's response to information or behavior without asking for changes to that information or behavior.

Example "I" messages: "I am frustrated because not everyone in the group has had a chance to share their

ideas for the project.” Or “I understand what you are worried about, but I’m not sure that I see it the same way.”

3. Ask for more information. Asking for more information is critical when a) you don’t understand the information clearly or b) there is a great quantity of information to absorb. Asking for additional information is especially critical if there is an emergency or crisis attached with the group interaction. Test your interpretation of what the speaker is saying. Ask relevant, open-ended questions that begin with “what,” “how,” “please explain,” or “describe.”

Examples: “Please explain how this information may impact the members of this group.” Or “If we were to proceed with this decision, please describe how it would impact business owners in the community.”

4. Paraphrase/Summarize. A powerful and important component of good communication is the ability to paraphrase (or reflect). This process lets the speaker know that you are trying to understand their viewpoint—and it allows you to identify or reflect what you believe you have heard. It clarifies the communication while slowing the pace (and intensity) of a conversation to a manageable level. To paraphrase, simply repeat what the speaker has told you, but do so in your own words. Do not embellish or add details that you did not hear.

Example: “I hear you saying that you are concerned about the group’s decision to approve the bond issue and the impact a new building will have on your neighborhood. What other options may be available?”

5. Offer thoughts for additional action. Ask whether the speaker is willing or wants to hear your thoughts. Don’t give your thoughts if the speaker declines.

Example: “Would you be interested in hearing my perspective on this issue?” If the speaker declines, move on to another topic of conversation. If the speaker responds affirmatively, use “I” messages and a positive manner to share your ideas, while taking care not to force your thoughts upon the (now) listener.

BODY LANGUAGE

Body language elements such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and body posture are components of non-verbal communication. Whether we are speaking or listening, we need to be aware of body language. Body language can tell us if another person is interested, bored, confused, or in disagreement. Body language should be used as a *checkpoint* in a conversation—we can use it to

help both our own and other’s understanding of a dialogue.

Be respectful of cultural differences regarding acceptable, and non-acceptable, forms of non-verbal communication. While one culture may find certain types of body language (i.e., maintaining eye contact or standing close while speaking) acceptable, another may find that same expression inappropriate or offensive.

GROUP PARTICIPATION

A group is most effective when all members participate and contribute to its conversations. When all group members practice effective communication, a sense of trust, cooperation, and productivity will thrive. Healthy groups that have worked to foster a culture of positive communication will

- demonstrate a willingness to work through conflict rather than avoid it,
- demonstrate a willingness to listen and pay attention to one another,
- focus efforts on addressing one topic of discussion at a time,
- help members feel comfortable in sharing thoughts/ideas,
- state decisions clearly so that all members can understand the outcomes,
- provide avenues for feedback,
- and maintain a consistent communications process that helps the group stay focused on its goals.

PROVIDING ENVIRONMENTS FOR OPEN COMMUNICATION

Fostering an environment for open communication in a group setting is not always easy to achieve. Therefore, if provided, such an environment is most often deliberately planned by group leaders. Here are a few communication-building techniques that will help ensure that all group members feel free to share their ideas and thoughts:

ROUND ROBIN If it is likely that everyone already has an opinion about a topic, the round-robin technique may be used at the beginning of a discussion. In addition, this technique can be used at the end of a discussion (because the facts and information have been shared). The round-robin technique works as follows:

1. Ask the entire group a single question regarding the topic.
2. Allow several minutes for group members to consider the question and formulate their response.
3. Each group member has the option to either take a turn and respond verbally to the question or PASS.
4. Every person in the group must have the opportunity

ty to share his/her response *before* any person can speak a second time.

BRAINSTORMING This is a process used to collect as many ideas as possible in a short period of time. Encourage group members to identify a *quantity* of ideas rather than worry about the quality of those ideas. Practicality is not necessary and creativity, both large and small, is encouraged:

- a. Post the rules for brainstorming. The rules are:
 - List as many ideas as possible.
 - Add ideas quickly.
 - A key word from each idea will be noted.
 - No judgment can be made about each idea.
 - It's OK to expand upon an idea that has already been posted.
 - No idea is too small or too large.
 - Brainstorming will continue until no new ideas are generated.
- b. Ask for a volunteer to serve as the recorder. Use flip charts to record the ideas as they are generated so the group can view them as the process proceeds.
- c. Take a break after brainstorming to allow group members to review the list and discuss some of the ideas.
- d. Establish group criteria for selecting the best ideas. Narrow the list to ideas that meet the criteria. A final solution may involve a combination of ideas.

NOMINAL GROUP This technique utilizes individual brainstorming, then small-group discussion. It provides the group with the ability to prioritize a list of ideas or solutions for consideration:

1. Distribute a notecard to each person.
2. State an open-ended question that addresses the issue being considered by the group. For example: "What are some ways to market the downtown business district?"
3. Ask participants to spend a specified amount of time (x minutes) writing down as many answers to the question as they can. (Participants should answer the questions on their own.) They should record their answers on the notecard they have been given.
4. Divide the participants into small groups. (If there are more than eight people in the group, divide into groups of four to six members each.) Within each small group, each individual should be given the opportunity to share each idea on their notecard. Questions can be asked for clarification, but no judgment should be made about the shared ideas. A group recorder should make a master list of the

shared ideas on a flip chart.

5. When all ideas from all members within a particular group have been shared, each member selects five ideas from the master list and ranks them on the reverse side of their notecard. Their highest-priority item receives a 5, while their lowest-priority item receives a 1.
6. Distribute 15 stickers to each member. Instruct members to go to the master list and place five stickers next to the idea that is their highest priority, and continuing likewise until they have placed only one sticker next to the idea that is their lowest priority.
7. Add the "points" that have been awarded by the group to the various ideas—thus, a group master-priority list will have been generated.

EMAIL COMMUNICATION WITHIN A GROUP

Often, group members will communicate with each other between face-to-face meetings through the use of email. The use of email has improved the ability of groups to communicate; it is a flexible and affordable means of sharing information. However, like other forms of non-verbal communication, email does not come without challenges. The following usage guidelines may help to improve the *effectiveness* of the communication:

1. **Choose subject lines wisely.** Recipients may prioritize email based on either the sender or the subject line. Be brief and succinct about the subject of the message.
2. **Never send something in an email that you do not want a broader audience to see.** Be sure to review the "send to" and "cc" list. This is especially easy to overlook if you often use "reply to all." Assess the content of your statements—once you send an email, you lose ownership of the message (you cannot control whom other group members may choose to share the email with).
3. **Be aware that email can sometimes cause hurt feelings or complicate issues.** This is especially true if the email addresses a crisis or a controversial issue. If you receive an email that generates strong feelings or confusion, take your time in responding to it. Give due thought and consideration to your response before hitting the "reply" button.
4. **If you must use them, use humor or sarcasm with care.** People often have a hard time distinguishing between comments that are meant to poke fun in a general and those that are meant to make a point. Humor and sarcasm don't always translate well via email because it is hard to know if the writer is serious or joking. Use humor or sarcasm with caution.

5. **As a group, decide if email will be used as a means of sharing group business and information or if it will be used as an informal networking opportunity.** This is important because not all group members may have email or may not check email on a regular basis. If group members know that group business will be shared via email, then they will have the expectation that they need to regularly check their email. The group should also identify a means for sharing the same information with group members who do not have email, so that all members of the group feel included and have a voice on important issues.

6. **If using email to announce group meetings, activities, or events, it is better to include the relevant information directly in the body of an email message versus through an attachment.** This is a more efficient use of group members' time and reduces the risk of sending viruses that may be transferred via attachments.

Through practicing the art of communication, people can learn more about both each other and the groups in which they work. Learning the skills of good communication helps to insure positive and productive relationships with the people around us.

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