

Communicating Clearly

Some people just talk nonsense. Some others are so wrapped up in the jargon of their industry that you can barely understand what they are saying. Have we forgotten the purpose of speech is communication, and, other than that delightful ringing in the ears we get when someone won't shut up, there is no point in talking if no one understands what is being said? If all this sounds a bit blunt don't be offended. This is, after all, an article about communicating clearly.

Before we can discuss how to communicate properly it is important to understand some of the traps we fall into when we start to enthusiastically engage someone in a conversation where we do all the talking. There are, in fact, 4 verbal communication no-nos we should be aware of – so we can avoid them. They are:

1. The Vague Talker – these are the folks who say a lot of words and no one really knows what it is they're saying. Some of it is because they use words that are insider terms, and sometimes it's because they think being vague makes them sound more abstract...and being abstract makes them seem more intelligent. In any case, when we engage in vague talking we are not only being annoying, we are being ineffectual.
2. The Absent Talker – these are the people who talk to us even though we never see them, those folks that prefer to communicate via telephone, email, and other impersonal channels. Communicating in this manner is not best because it does not permit each side to gain additional understanding through non-verbal messages such as body language.
3. The Optimistic Talker – these are the people who emphasize the good and downplay the bad. Most of the time we might point this out as a good thing, but when it comes to communicating, particularly business communications, it is important to speak honestly and avoid any temptation to give accounts too optimistic or not sufficiently critical.
4. The Invisible Talker – these are the folks who speak with no personality and are therefore all but invisible to those around him/her. These people need to hone their speaking skills so that they are able to attract and maintain the attention of the people they are addressing. Communication can't be effective if no one is listening to you.

Now that we know what not to do, let's review the 10 elements of excellent verbal communication. They are:

1. Speak Clearly – sometimes when we're excited or wrapped up in a conversation we speak too quickly or swallow our words. We need to be certain we are not losing some of our meaning because we are not being clear.
2. Use Language Everyone Understands – if you are in a group that shares a certain lingo than feel free to use all the inside terms and abbreviations you want. However, if you are trying to communicate with someone from outside your immediate world, you should avoid using terms that may not be understood. Chances are the person not understanding will not ask you what a particular phrase means, leaving them with a void in their comprehension and you with a sense that you got your point across, when in fact you might not have.

3. Support Your Language With Other Methods of Communication - outside of your arms waving wildly in some sort of convulsive manner, supporting your words with body language is an extremely effective way of communicating. People use the combination of words and gestures to express themselves more firmly, and people listening have been shown to have a higher degree of comprehension when the two are combined.

4. Let Your Personality Show - people respond to people and letting your personality show in the way you communicate is critical to both being understood and developing good business relationships. So, if you have a good sense of humor, allow it to show in your speech. If you have a quirky personality, let that come through. The important thing is be yourself.

5. Structure Your Speech – just like a good story or presentation, everything you say in a business setting should have a purpose, and be communicated via a beginning, a middle and an end. If you take too long to get to the end, you may wind up being less effective than you had hoped, as people will become impatient and tune you out before you had the chance to say the really important part of your message. So be brief and be concise.

6. Make Eye Contact – making eye contact is a great way to let someone know that you are communicating with him/her. It is very important not to avoid the other person's eyes, and while you shouldn't stare into their eyes, you should make sure that from time to time you make contact.

7. Stand at an Appropriate Distance - good communication is about comfort levels. People are most comfortable when they have the space they need to find their comfort zone. Make sure you are not standing so far away that there is no intimacy and it is difficult to hear. Conversely, do not stand so close that the other person feels their space is being invaded.

8. Watch Your Volume – make sure you are speaking at the volume necessary to be heard, but not so loud that you are making people uncomfortable, or so softly that people need to strain to hear. Your volume tends to go up if you are excited and may go down if you are insecure.

9. Enjoy Yourself – if you are having fun there is the chance that others are having fun being with you. While this is not an absolute, chances are your good time will be communicated and people will enjoy hearing what you have to say.

10. Listen – saving the most important for last, the most critical aspect of speaking is listening. You cannot have a conversation if you are the only one speaking because (a) by definition a conversation requires that 2 or more people speak, and (b) if you get the reputation for someone who doesn't listen nobody will bother to speak to you. Listening is the key to speaking because the other person will be giving hints about what to say. So listen before you speak.

Communication is how we all interact and without it we would be islands unto ourselves. The better we are at communicating the more we enjoy doing it. Follow these simple hints and you'll find yourself becoming the master communicator in no time.