



Workplace Communication

So Much More Than A Soft Skill

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While an employee's technical skills, or hard skills, are required to perform their job each day, I often hear employers mention the need for employees to possess better "soft skills", such as confidence, communication, problem solving, ethics, and time management. Soft skills refer to the personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social interactions that in the eye of the employer or supervisor differentiate employees from one another and make good employees great. When hiring, employers may put just as much emphasis and requirements on the employee to possess excellent soft skills because these skills can be just as important of a job performance indicator as the employee's technical skills.

We could debate for months which soft skill is the most important or critical in the workplace today. All soft skills are important. However, communication is foundational to company survival. Communication is threaded throughout customer service, both internal and external customer service. Moreover, the soft skill of communication has so much depth and breadth; arguably we could consider it a hard skill in today's workplace since it requires practice and some degree of ongoing professional development.

Most organizations are shaped like a triangle. Meaning, they usually have a CEO/ President at the top, Vice-presidents, District Managers, Regional Managers, Managers, Leads, etc. Because of this expanding and layered organizational chart, communication can become distorted, diverted and/or discontinued as it moves from one layer to the next. To illustrate, if during the communication chain someone makes the decision the information does not need to be shared with the next level in the chain, communication discontinuance occurs. If a vital piece of information is omitted or perhaps information is added that did not need to be included, distortion of the communication occurs. Lastly, if the communication is delivered to the wrong persons in the organization (often due to a distortion of the communication earlier in the chain), diversion occurs and the intended recipient never receives the information. Distortion and diversion can waste time in an organization so it is critical that protocols are in place to minimize these verbal mishaps as much as possible.

Another issue with workplace verbal communication is the use of jargon. Jargon is a set of special words or expressions used by a particular profession or group and difficult for outsiders to understand. The use of jargon is like a type of shorthand between members of a particular group of people. Jargon is meaningless outside a certain context, generally unnecessarily complicated, and more often used to impress, rather than to inform, your audience.

Employees in different departments, service areas, or organizational layers will have their own jargon or “lingo”. It is important to recognize that other departments may also have their own jargon that you may not completely understand nor will they completely understand your department’s jargon. Therefore, unless the terms are used organization-wide, it is critical interdepartmental communication is kept as free from jargon as possible. Also, when dealing with customers, the use of technical terms and jargon have been known to decrease your customer service, cause delays in completing the task, cause customer frustration, or cause a mistake to be made due to a misunderstanding.

Today’s multicultural workplace is also another reason to avoid the use of jargon. Differences in cultures and languages can hamper communication and jargon use will only increase misinterpretation. Cultural barriers create a unique workplace environment where workers are expected to behave in a particular way to gain acceptance. Language barriers result not only when workers have different native languages but also when others use jargon, buzzwords or terminology that is unfamiliar to non-native language speakers or even new employees. Therefore, when working with non-native language speakers and new employees, recognize that they may not understand what is being communicated and may also be too embarrassed to ask for clarification. This lack of them seeking understanding could cause them to make a mistake or provide the wrong service.

It is important to remember that at least 70% of what is communicated is done without speaking a word during face-to-face communications. This 70% is referred to as nonverbal communication. Be aware of your nonverbal communication because when it sends a different message than the words you are communicating, those around us can become confused and skeptical of our motives and actions. Nonverbal communication can include voice signals that put emphases on certain words to change the meaning of what is spoken. Consider the following statement, “I didn’t say you had a bad attitude.” Depending on where the inflection or emphasis is placed can completely change the interpreted understanding. Putting the inflection on the word “I” in the sentence implies that I didn’t say it, but somebody else did. Putting the emphasis on the word “bad” might communicate that one’s attitude isn’t bad, but something is wrong with it.

Additional nonverbal communication signals can include objects, space and time. You can indicate a tremendous amount about your willingness to communicate with others based upon how you place workplace objects such as furniture, counters and desks. Regarding space, most North Americans prefer to maintain a distance of between a foot and a half and two feet between others when they are communicating. When we decide to eliminate that distance and huddle close to others it sends very distinct nonverbal communication message to others witnessing the conversation.

Regarding time signals, consider what message someone sends when they are on time, not on time, when they keep someone waiting, or are not available/can’t make time for someone. How you handle your time with others communicates messages non-verbally. For example, someone who is always late to a department meeting might communicate: “I don’t think this meeting is very important.” Or if someone never has the

time to meet with you might communicate: “I don’t want to spend any time with you because I don’t like you.”

Besides verbal and nonverbal communication, a significant portion of an employee’s daily communication may be written. Depending on the job, this could include: contracts, estimates, repair orders, work logs, journals, incident reports and other internal and possibly external forms. Regardless of using paper or electronic medium, it is critical your written communication is clear, complete and concise.

In today’s electronic world, professional communication by e-mail is critical to your success within the organization. Many view e-mail as a “casual” form of communication; therefore, people can oftentimes come across as unprofessional when sending e-mails. It is important to remember, that an e-mail is a written form of communication and is a representation of your professionalism. E-mails are easily forwarded, so it is important to be clear, organized, and professional when you send them out.

When communicating via email try to have the email bring closure to work, not create more work for yourself. Always ask yourself if calling or visiting the recipient would be a better way to communicate. If you do write an email, it should be short and whenever possible your point made in just the subject line or the space in the preview pane. Also, do not assume other people are staring at their screens, waiting for your e-mail—it may take a day, two days or longer for them to respond. And regarding your personal time management, a good rule is to never spend more than five minutes dealing with an e-mail. When you go over five minutes, stop and make a phone call.

Lastly, for your customers, coworkers and supervisor to feel assured that you know what you are doing and that you will be able to help them, they need to feel that you are listening. One of the most important communication skills to develop is active listening. Active listening requires you to understand what is being communicated from the speaker’s point of view and it requires you as the listener to concentrate on what is being said by the speaker and tune out the hundreds, if not potentially thousands, of distracting thoughts. It also requires you to listen with empathy and put yourself in the speaker’s shoes. For it to work, you must practice acceptance and a willingness to take responsibility for getting the full-intended meaning from the speaker. By practicing acceptance you will begin to listen objectively without judging what is being said. This is perhaps the hardest listening skill to master because we are easily distracted by the content that we disagree with. To assure people you were listening, ask questions and summarize what they said.

We have barely scratched the surface of workplace communication. There is so much more that could be discussed. Whether you are in executive management, middle management, skilled labor, clerical support or ancillary services; effective communication in the workplace requires ongoing practice and development. The companies that establish and practice effective communication will find it easier to meet their established goals and missions.



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