

## Communicating in the Workplace

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*"Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually 'communicating' with employees. The message always boils down to: 'Work hard, obey orders. We'll take care of you.' (That message is obsolete by fifty years and wasn't very promising then.)"*

(Further Up The Organization by Robert Townsend, published by Knopf, 1984, p. 166)

Let's face it. Very few of us consider ourselves to be "people persons". Most of us consider ourselves shy and introverted. We are panic-stricken to do any public speaking. We are even reluctant to introduce ourselves to someone new at a party or a function. We are afraid to let someone else know our thoughts because they might be considered 'wrong'. Whatever the heck 'wrong' is.

Let's face it. If we work for a living, we must attempt to communicate with all sorts of people. We must communicate with our boss. We must communicate with the people who report to us. Throughout the course of a working day, we might have to communicate with clients (existing and potential; happy and angry), suppliers, government agencies and the like. Even if you work in front of a computer all day, you still report to someone who will be interested to know what you are doing for the company. Even if you own the company, you still need to communicate with at least one client who is going to pay you for your services. So, like it or not, we have to be prepared to communicate effectively.

What is effective communication?

Simply put, effective communication is all about getting some one or some group to understand exactly what you are thinking and trying to say. This involves making sure that the person you are speaking or writing to understands the words you are using and the context in which you are using them.

I have listed below some tips that will, I hope, make you feel more comfortable communicating with all the people that you have around you. This

is by no means an exhaustive list nor in any particular order.

### Brevity Is Best

More than fourscore and seven years ago, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg address. The address lasted only a few moments and yet we all remember his speech of the people, by the people and for the people. Lincoln's predecessor on the podium spoke for two hours! Does anyone remember what he said?

As a draftsman, you probably know more about what it took to prepare the plan than anyone else. As a party chief, you likely know more about the data that went into putting the sketches together than anyone else. Each of you know a great deal about the work that you do. Perhaps more than you realize. However, most people do not have the time nor are interested to learn all that you know. They, whoever "they" are, are more likely to want to read or hear a summary of the situation because it is easier to understand and follow.

Let's say your boss comes to you and asks, "What happened on job XDJ-14?" You might be tempted to discuss everything that happened on that job, including where you had lunch, in an attempt to maybe answer the question.

Answer the question briefly and clearly so your boss understands your answer. If a simple 'yes' or 'no' is all that is required, then say it. More likely, a (brief) explanation is necessary. If your boss needs to ask further questions, then let him or her ask them.

Your efforts will be greatly appreciated. However, if you don't understand what part of job XDJ-14 your boss is talking about, ask. There is nothing worse than answering the wrong question.

If you must ask your boss a question or prepare a report for your boss, keep it brief too. A long-winded question will not be understood. A long fancy report will not be read.

### Tell Them Everything

Huh? Tell them everything? You just told me to keep it brief. Now you are telling me to keep it brief AND tell them everything?

Yes. If you want everyone to sing from the same page in the songbook (and in the same key), then it is absolutely critical that the choir knows what they are doing.

A survey job is not very different from a choir. All you need to do is cover the five W's and one H. For example:

- WHO is going to be working on this job?
- WHAT are their responsibilities?
- WHERE is the site? Is it an urban or rural setting?
- WHEN do we start? WHEN does it have to be finished?
- HOW are we going to approach this particular job?
- WHY are approaching it in this way?

See, these questions do not require a great deal of time to answer. But if you neglect to address them, watch out! If all of these questions are properly looked after, then the survey crew will make a wonderful sound. But a choir will sound so much better if everyone knows what the other singers are doing. Don't just tell instrumentpersons what their responsibilities are; make sure they know what you as the Party Chief will be doing too. Canada's historic victory at Vimy Ridge during World War I was the result of a brash new idea. The army officers explained to the infantry not only their platoon's objectives but also the objectives of neighbouring battalions and machine gunners. When chaos reigned in the midst of the battle, the infantry was able to improvise if cracks started to appear in their defenses. Explaining military strategy to the foot soldiers had not been tried before during World War I but it worked.

What happens if you fail to tell your boss or a crew everything relevant

about a job? You are telling your boss that something has gone wrong and you're afraid to say. You are telling the crew that you don't trust them. And if they think you don't trust them, they will certainly not trust you!

If something has gone wrong, don't be afraid to admit it. We've all made mistakes. We've all made some pretty big mistakes. If you tell someone what has gone wrong, he or she is usually willing to help (particularly if you have helped them in the past). You might want to approach the situation like this, "I have a problem. Can you help me? I need your help to...." Share the pain.

When things go right, share some of the credit too. A meaningful 'thank you' is sometimes the best form of compensation.

## Man From Mars

So you think you're being an effective communicator?

Try this. If you were a man from Mars, would you understand what you were trying to say?

Just stop and seriously think about this for a moment. If you were in the other person's shoes, how would you react?

Let's say that you are a client's neighbour who doesn't know anything about surveying, would you understand your explanation of Right-of-Entry?

Let's say that you are a party chief explaining a job to an instrumentperson with only two years experience. Would you understand your explanation of why you would/would not accept the fence as the boundary?

Don't take the easy way out and say that the neighbour or the instrumentperson should know. If you do, you are only asking for a major headache.

## Jargon And Computers

The world of surveying is full of jargon. EDM's, total stations, adverse possession, double-front surveys are all terms that we tend to take for granted. To the unfamiliar, these words and phrases can sound like a foreign language. They create a barrier between you and the people you are trying to help. This applies not only to dealing

with a client on a site but also to people within an office. Ask yourself, does the draftperson or calculator really understand the terms the field staff are using? Does the office down the street have the same definition for some of the jargon that we use? Don't assume that it is the same.

The point is, don't use jargon. Use simple, plain, common language wherever possible. Remember, to those unconnected with surveying, a party chief sounds like a social convenor!

With virtually everyone using computers, new jargon has entered our language. We speak of hard disks, windows, drag and drop. There is plenty of opportunity for miscommunication here. Everyone's computer skills are at a slightly different level. Be careful not to assume that their experience and understanding is the same as yours. Otherwise, you may have a long conversation with someone and still not understand the other person. If you are unsure of the other person's understanding of computers, ask them. Simply, ask.

Eliminate the computer jargon; don't hide behind it.

## Use Examples And Experiences

Many years ago, a lady walked into her doctor's office complaining of a heart problem. After listening to the lady's symptoms, the doctor thought he knew exactly what the problem was. The doctor placed his stethoscope directly on the woman's chest expecting to hear an irregular beat. After a couple of moments the doctor did not hear what he expected to hear and said to his assistant "no thrill". The patient, upon hearing this comment, pulled together her blouse, accused the doctor of professional misconduct and stormed off. The doctor was left speechless.

This story illustrates two points. First, in the case of a profession, like medicine or surveying, you have a greater responsibility to make yourself understood by using terms and phrases that will be understood by almost anyone. See Jargon and Computers above.

Second, you will probably always remember this story as an example of miscommunication because it is so visual and plausible.

When you are trying to explain a procedure or an issue to someone, try to illustrate the point.

Suppose you suspect a SIB is not in its original location but the party chief thinks that it is. Have you ever been in a similar situation where the SIB had been disturbed? If so, you could ask the party chief to reconsider because you remember a similar situation when....

Suppose somebody in the office doesn't really like searching. Try to get them to think of themselves as a modern-day Sherlock Holmes. Or get instrumentpersons to think of themselves as Indiana Jones in search of the lost SIB.

By using examples and previous experiences, you have given the other person an image to think about. If a picture really is worth a thousand words, then you will be a thousand times better off by using one example rather than the exclamation, "Do it this way because I know it is right!"

## Listen

Even if we consider ourselves shy, we are much better talkers than we are listeners. Really, we are a bunch of rotten listeners. For effective communicating you need a listener as well as a talker.

If someone wants to speak to you, be a good listener. Here's how. As much as possible, turn off all the noise around you. In the field, turn off the chain saw. In the office, turn off the radio. If you are doing something else when someone wants to speak to you, drop it or ask the person to come back later.

Give the person your full attention. Do not let your eyes wander around the office or the job site. Do not stare at your own work wondering how you're going to fix this problem while you pretend to "listen" to someone else. Do not answer the telephone in the middle of your conversation. This person has something to say, let him say it.

Once you have given the person your full attention, do not interrupt. Period. Avoid making judgements and/or decisions about what the person is saying until the person has finished speaking. If you disagree with what the person is saying, don't start shaking your head in the middle of the conversation.

By not giving the person your full attention, you are telling the person, through your body language, that he or she has nothing worthwhile to say or contribute. Just sit back and listen. You may be surprised what you hear and you've learned.

## Say It With Words

Is it better to speak to someone directly or write out your comments? Obviously, if you are in the field you are not going to write a memo to the party chief thirty metres away. But if you have a choice, which would you prefer?

Wherever you have a choice, go speak to someone one-on-one. First, you get immediate feedback on your comments and, if necessary, you can adjust your views. Second, the other person hears the tone and inflection in your voice (which is just as powerful as body language). Third, you know your message is heard unlike a memo on a scrap piece of notepaper under a pile of other papers.

When you go to speak with (not, to) someone directly you have the opportunity to actually solve a problem, make some progress, and feel better about yourself for doing so. Some people like to write a memo or a letter

if they have to deal with a controversial or uncomfortable situation. The people who receive these letters and memos call the authors cowards for not having the courage to speak to them directly.

Of course, writing notes does have its place. Field notes will not be obsolete. They will always be necessary. Just remember that they must be clear, concise and capable of no misunderstanding. However, in all other situations, speak to a person directly and, if necessary, follow it up with a short written note.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

In a short article such as this one, it is impossible to cover off everything that will make you a more effective communicator. Even if I did have the space to write an exhaustive article, it would not make communicating any easier. We are, after all, human beings accustomed to conflict and differences of opinion. The point is that we must work hard to understand each others' points of view. We cannot take good communications for granted.

Even the points mentioned in this paper will not be worth anything if the people trying to communicate with each other do not start from a position

of trust and mutual understanding. If you do not trust one another, how can you possibly speak with one another to resolve a problem? If you are unable to agree on your objectives first (for the company, the job, or the plan), then attempts to discuss any other topic will prove fruitless.

The issue of effective communication is a difficult one because everyone perceives things differently. What may be obvious to me in this article may very well be confusing for you. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to keep these things in mind:

- \* People want to learn, know and understand what is going on around them.
- \* Good ideas can come from many different sources - including your boss and the people who report to you.
- \* If you are unsure, ask. No one ever really gets into trouble for asking.
- \* If you believe in something, stand up for your convictions (after all, your the expert). If you give in, give in all the way.
- \* Treat the people you work with at least the same respect you treat delicate survey equipment.



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