

Supportive interpersonal communication as an antecedent for effective management

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Executive Summary:

The effects of positive relationships are much stronger and more long-lasting than just making people happy or uplifted. When individuals are able to build relationships that are positive and that create energy, important physiological, emotional, intellectual, and social consequences result. Positive relationships also help people perform better in tasks and at work, and learn more effectively. That is, positive relationships help people feel safe and secure, so individuals are more able to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Not surprisingly, the performance of organizations is also enhanced by the presence of positive relationships among employees. Positive relationships foster cooperation among people, so the things that get in the way highly successful performance such as conflict, disagreements, confusion and ambiguity, unproductive competition and, anger, or personal offense are minimized. Employees are more loyal and committed to their work and to the organization when positive relationships exist, and information exchange, and dialogue, and knowledge transfer are significantly enhanced.

Key Words: communication, information, manager, relationship, effectiveness, organization

In an age of electronic communication, the most frequently used means of passing messages to other people is via electronic technology (Gackenbach, 1998). E-mail now dominates communication channels in organizations, and it is purported to enhance information flow, the sharing of knowledge, consistency of communication, quality of feedback, and speed or cycle time (Synopsis of Communication Consulting, 1998). However, international surveys indicate that face-to-face communication is still the second most frequent form of communication, but it remains the most problematic (Rosen, 1998). One report concluded: "Technology is ahead of people's ability to cope and use it; it's becoming part of problem, not part of the solution" (Synopsis of Communication Consulting, 1998). Technology does not make messages more useful unless good interpersonal relations are in the place first. Accurate interpretation and effective message delivery depends on relationships of trust and shared context. Of course, some relationships can be created electronically, but meaningful relationships based on trust are the exceptions rather than rule.

Surveys have consistently shown that the ability to effectively communicate face-to-face is the characteristic judged by managers to be most critical in determining promotability. Frequently the quality of communication between managers and their employees is fairly low. This ability may involve a broad array of activities, from writing to speech making to body language. Whereas skill in each of these activities is important for most managers it is face-to-face, one-on-one communication that dominates all the other types in predicting managerial success. Spitzberg (1994) concluded a comprehensive review of the interpersonal competence literature and found convincing and unequivocal evidence that incompetence in interpersonal communication is “very damaging personally, relationally, and socially.”

Even with all this available information about the communication process and the dedicated resources in many organizations for fostering better communication, most managers still indicate that poor communication is their biggest problem (Schnake et al., 1990). In a study of major manufacturing organizations undergoing large-scale changes, Cameron (1994) asked two key questions: (1) What is your major problem in trying to get organizational changes implemented? and (2) What is the key factor that explains your past success in effectively managing organizations change? To both questions, a large majority of managers gave the same answer: communication. All of them agreed that more communication is better than less communication. Haney (1992) reported on a survey of over 13,000 people in universities, businesses, military units, government agencies, and hospitals in which “virtually everyone felt that he or she was communicating at least as well as and, in many cases better than almost everyone else in the organization.

Despite the availability of sophisticated information technologies and elaborately developed models of communication process, individuals still communicate pretty much as they please often in abrasive, insensitive, and unproductive ways. More often than not, it is the interpersonal aspect of communication that stands in the way of effective message delivery rather than the inability to deliver accurate information (Golen, 1990). Ineffective communication may lead individuals to dislike each other, be offended by each other, lose confidence in each other, refuse to listen to each other, and disagree with each other, as well as cause a host of other interpersonal problems.

Supportive communication seeks to preserve a positive relationship between the communicators while still addressing the problem at hand. It allows you to have negative feedback, or to resolve a difficult issue with another person and, as a result, strengthen your relationship. The goal of supportive

communication is not merely to be liked by other people or to be judged by to be a nice person. Nor it is used merely to produce social acceptance. Positive interpersonal relationships have practical, instrumental value in organizations. Researchers (Losada & Heaphy, 2004) have found, for example, that organizations fostering these kinds of relationships enjoy higher productivity, faster problem solving, higher-quality outputs, and fewer conflicts and subversive activities than do groups and organizations in which relationships are less positive.

One important lesson that American managers have been taught by foreign competitors is that good relationships among employees, and between managers and employees, produce bottom-line advantages. Hanson (1986) found that the presence of good interpersonal relationships between managers and subordinates was three times more powerful in predicting profitability in 40 major corporations over five-year period than the four next most powerful variables—market share, capital intensity, firm size, and sales growth rate—combined. Supportive communication, therefore, is not just a “nice-person technique,” but a proven competitive advantage for both manager and organizations. The eight attributes of supportive communication, which will spell out below, serve as behavioral guidelines for overcoming defensiveness and disconfirmation. Competent coaching and counseling depend on knowing and practicing these guidelines. They also depend on maintaining a balance among the guidelines, as we will illustrate.

1. Supportive communication is based on congruence, not incongruence.

Most researchers and observers agree that the best interpersonal communications and the best relationships are based on congruence. That is, what is communicated, verbally and non-verbally, matches exactly what the individual is thinking and feeling (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1996). Two kinds of incongruence are possible: One is a mismatch between what one is experiencing and what one is aware of. For example, an individual may not even be aware of that he or she is experiencing anger or hostility toward another person, even though the anger or hostility is really present. In severe cases therapists must help individuals reach greater congruence between experience and awareness. A second kind of incongruence and the one more closely related to supportive communication is mismatch between what one thinks or feels and what one communicates. For example, an individual may be aware of a feeling of anger but will not say that the feeling exists.

Stephen Covey (1989) introduced the concept of an “emotional bank account” in which individuals make deposits in an account that builds the relationship with another person. These deposits help

establish mutual trust and respect in the relationship. Similarly, communication can't be genuinely supportive unless it is based on trust and respect and is also perceived as trusting and respectful. Otherwise false impressions and miscommunication result. Congruence is a prerequisite of trust. Congruence is also relates to matching the content of the words spoken to the communicator's manners and tone of voice. "What a nice day" can mean the opposite if mattered sarcastically. "I'm just here to help" can mean the opposite if said without sincerity, especially if the history of the relationship suggests otherwise. Striving for congruence, of course, does not mean that we should blow off steam immediately upon getting upset, nor doesn't mean that we cannot repress certain inappropriate feelings. Other principles of supportive communication must also be experienced, and achieving congruence at the expense of all other consideration is not productive. In problematic interactions, when reactive feedback must be given, individuals are more likely to express too little congruence than too much. This is because many people are afraid to respond in a completely honest way or not sure how to communicate without being offensive.

2. Supportive communication is descriptive, not evaluative.

Evaluative communication makes a judgment or places a label on other individuals or on their behavior: "You are doing it wrong" or "You are incompetent". Such evaluation makes other people feel under attack and consequently defensively. They see the communicator is judgmental. Examples of probable responses are, "I am not doing it wrong" or "I am more capable than you are". Arguments, bad feelings and a deterioration in the interpersonal relationship result. The tendency to evaluate others is strongest when the issue is emotionally charged or when a person feels personally threatened. Sometimes people try to resolve their own bad feelings or anxieties by placing a label on others: "You are dumb" implies "I am smart", therefore, I feel better. They may have such strong feelings that they want to punish the other person for violating their expectations or standards.

The problem with evaluative communication is that it is likely to be self-perpetuating. Placing a label on someone else generally leads that person to place a label on you, which makes you defensive in return. When you defensive and the other person is defensive, it's not hard to see why effective communication does not occur. An alternative to evaluation is descriptive communication. Because it is difficult to avoid evaluating other people without some alternative strategy, descriptive communication is designed to reduce the tendency to evaluate and to perpetuate a defensive interaction. It allows you to be as well as being helpful. Descriptive communication involves three steps.

3. Supportive communication is problem oriented, not person oriented.

Problem-oriented communication focuses on problems and solutions rather than personal traits. Person-oriented communication on the characteristics of the individual, not the event. “This is the problem” rather than “You are the problem” illustrates the difference between the problem and person-orientation. Problem-oriented communication is useful even when personal appraisals are called for because it focuses on behaviors and event. Person-oriented communication, on the other hand, often focuses on things that can’t be changed or controlled, and it can send the message that the individual is inadequate. Statements such as “You are dictatorial” and “You are insensitive” describe the person, while “I’m being left out of decision making” and “We don’t seem to see things the same way” describe problems. (“It’s because you want to control other people”), whereas describing overt behaviors is problem oriented.

4. Supportive communication validates rather than invalidates individuals.

Validating communication helps people feel recognized, understood, accepted, and valued. Communication that is invalidating arouses negative feelings about self-worth, identity and relatedness to others. It denies the presence, uniqueness or importance of other individuals. Barnlund’s (1968: 618) observation more than a quarter-century ago is even more true today: *People often do not take time, do not listen, do not try to understand, but interrupt, anticipate, criticize, or disregard what is said; in their own remarks they are frequently vague, inconsistent, verbose, insincere, or dogmatic. As a result, people often conclude conversations feeling more inadequate, more misunderstood, and more alienated than when they started.*

Communication that is superiority oriented gives the impression that the communicator is informed while others are ignorant, adequate while others are inadequate, competent while others are incompetent. It creates a barrier between the communicator and those to whom the message is sent. Superiority-oriented communication can take the form of put-downs, in which others are made to look bad so that the communicators look good, or it can take the form of “one-upmanship” in which the communicator tries to elevate himself or herself in the esteem of others. One form of one-upmanship is withholding information either boastfully or coyly to trip people up. Boasting almost always makes others uncomfortable, mainly because it is design to convey superiority. Another common form of superiority-oriented communication is the use of jargon, acronyms or words used in such a way as to exclude others or to create barriers in a relationship. Doctors, lawyers, government employees, and

mainly professionals are well known for their use of jargon or acronyms, designed to exclude others. Speaking a foreign language in the presence of individuals who don't understand, it may also be done to create the impression of superiority.

Manager's communication validates the subordinate when it *identifies areas of agreement* and joint commitment. One way to express validation based on agreement is to identify positive behaviors and positive attitudes as well as negative ones during the process of coaching and counseling. The manager should point out important points made by the subordinate before pointing out trivial ones, areas of agreement before areas of disagreement, advantages of the subordinate's statements before disadvantages, compliments before criticisms and positive next steps before past mistakes. The point is, validating other people helps create feelings of self-worth and self-confidence that can translate into self-motivation and improved performance. Invalidation seldom produces such positive outcomes, yet it is a common form of management response to subordinates.

5. Supportive communication is specific, not global

The more specific a statement is the more effective it is in motivating improvement. For example, the statement "You have trouble managing your time" is too general to be useful, whereas "You spent an hour scheduling meetings today when that could have been done by your assistant" provides specific information that can serve as a basis for behavioral change. Specific statements avoid extremes and absolutes. The problem with extreme is that it denies any alternatives. The possible responses of the recipient of the communication are severely constrained. To contradict or deny the statement generally leads to defensiveness and arguments. Specific statements may not be useful if they focus on things over which another person has no control. "I hate it when it rains," for example may release some personal frustration, but nothing can be done to change the weather. Specific communication is useful to the extent that it focuses on an identifiable problem or behavior about which something can be done (e.g., "it bothers me when you talk so loudly in the library that it disturbs others' concentration").

6. Supportive communication is conjunctive, not disjunctive

Conjunctive communication is joined to previous messages in some way. It flows smoothly. Disjunctive communication is disconnected from what was stated before. Communication can become disjunctive in at least three ways (Whetton and Cameron, 2007). First, there can be lack of equal opportunity to speak. When one person interrupts another, when someone dominates by controlling "air time," or when two or more people try to speak at the same time, the communication is

disjunctive. Second, extended pauses are disjunctive. When speakers pause for long periods in the middle of their speeches or when there are long pauses before responses, the communication is disjunctive. Pauses need not be total silence; the space may be filled with “umm,” “aaah,” or repetition of something stated earlier, but the communication does not progress. Third, topic control can be disjoined. When one person decides unilaterally what the next topic of conversation will be, the communication is disjunctive. These three factors-taking turns speaking, management of timing, and topic control-contribute to what Wiemann (1977) called interaction management. They have been found to be crucial in supportive communication. In an empirical study of perceived communication competence, Wiemann (1977) found that “the smoother the management of the interaction, the more competent the communicator was perceived to be.” People who took turns, who did not dominate with pauses or excessive air time, and who connected what they said to what others had said in the first were judged as competent communicators.

7. Supportive communication is owned, not disowned

Taking responsibility for one’s statements and acknowledging that the source of the ideas is oneself and not another person or group is owning communication. Disowning communication is suggested by use of third-person or first-person plural words. “We think,” “They said,” or “One might say.” Disowned communication is attributed to an unknown person, group, or to some external source (e.g., “Lots of people think”). The communication avoids taking responsibility for the message and therefore avoids investigating in the interaction. Glasser (2000) based his approach to mental health-reality therapy-on the concept of taking responsibility for, or owning, communication and behavior.

8. Supportive communication requires listening, not one-way message delivery

Haas and Arnold (1995) found that in the workplace, about one-third of the characteristics people use to judge communication competence have to do with listening. Kramer (1997) found that good listening accounted for 40 percent of the variance in the effective leadership. In short, good listeners are more likely to be perceived as skillful communicators. In fact, people who are judged to be the most “wise,” or to possess the attribute of wisdom-and, therefore, are the most sought after people with whom to interact-are also the best listeners (Kramer, 2000).

In a survey of personnel directors in 300 businesses and industries conducted to determine what skills are most important in becoming a manager, Crocker (1978) reported that effective listening was ranked highest. Tests have shown, for example that individuals are usually about 25 percent effective in

listening, that is they listen to and understand only about one-fourth of what is communicated (Haas et al., 1995). Geddie (1999) reported that in a survey across 15 countries, listening was found to be the poorest communication skills. When asked to rate the extent to which they are skilled listeners, 85 percent of all individuals rate themselves as average or worse. Only 5 percent rate themselves as highly skilled (Steil, 1980).

People do not know they are being listened to unless the listener makes some type of response. This can be simple eye contact and nonverbal responsiveness such as smiles, nods, and focused attention. However, competent managers who must coach and counsel also select carefully from repertoire of verbal response alternatives that clarify the communication as well as strengthen the interpersonal relationship. The mark of supportive listener is the competence to select appropriate responses to others' statements (Bostrom, 1997).

The most important barriers to effective communication in organizations are interpersonal. Much technological progress has been made in the past two decades in improving the accuracy of message delivery in organizations, but communication problems still persist between managers and their subordinates and peers. A major reason for these problems is that the communication does not support a positive interpersonal relationship. Instead, it frequently engenders distrust, hostility, defensiveness, and feelings of incompetence and low self-esteem. Ask any manager about major problems being faced in his or her organizations, and communication problems will most assuredly be listed.

Dysfunctional communication is seldom associated with situations in which compliments are given, congratulations are made, a bonus is awarded, or other positive interactions occur. Most people have little trouble communicating effectively in positive or complimentary situations. The most difficult, potentially harmful communication patterns are most likely to emerge when you are giving feedback on poor performance, saying "no" to a proposal or request, resolving a difference of opinion between two subordinates, correcting problem behaviors, receiving criticism from others, or facing other negative interactions. These situations also arise frequently in the context of coaching and counseling others. Handling these situations in a way that that fosters interpersonal growth and engenders stronger relationships is one mark of an effective manager.

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