

It's Not What You Said, It's What They Heard That Matters

This week's interview is with Dr. Shari Frisinger, Shari is a dynamic, energetic Type A personality that has learned over the years to view failure as a success stepping stone and friction and conflict as opportunities to expand her horizons. Not one to hold back, she achieved her Black Belt in TaeKwonDo in two short years, and her Masters in Aeronautical Science, with no formal aviation background, in a short 27 months. A keynote speaker, trainer, coach, consultant and blogger, her topics focus on clear communications, "captainitis" and reducing frustrating friction.

Have you ever felt like you lost a little of who you are while trying to conform to a work culture? Have you ever wondered how to quickly find the decision maker in the room? Have you ever felt like introductions at networking events are boring? If so, read on. Shari's advice touches on all kinds of workplace tips that can sharpen your game.

LISA: Most professionals have heard of an elevator speech. You give it a new twist by facing the reality that a stranger might be thinking "so what, who cares." How can we get started in crafting an introduction that feels more relevant to our audience?

SHARI: Craft an introduction that feels more like a conversation with a headline ... start with a powerful fact or question. That will get your listener's attention for two reasons: it immediately connects them to you and they are expecting the typical "Hi My name is my company is We do ..."so it is a jolt to the routine.

Follow it up with one or two supporting statements that they can easily relate to. Then your name, company name and tag line or powerful last statement. Most people start with their name and their company ... put the focus on themselves. Your elevator speech, to be effective, needs to be about the other person - how and why they need what you offer.

LISA: You wrote an article on asking questions to build rapport. How can we use questions to better connect with new people in our networks?

SHARI: Asking questions shows interest in and respect for the other person. It's also a great way to learn about things we don't regularly hear about and expand our boundaries. Questions such as: why is that? Why not? How so? Really? What does that mean? What would the result be? What did you mean when you said ...? [be careful in asking this that you are not sounding defensive or accusatory]. You can even repeat one or two of their words in a question format - words that seems to resonate with them.

Nearly every closed question can be rephrased to an open question: "How was your evening?" Can be changed to "What did you do last night?" "How are you?" can be modified to "What's the most exciting [or best] thing that happened to you today [or recently]?" Any question that keeps the other person talking and keeps you both engaged is the perfect one to use.

To ensure what you heard is what they said, you can ask “Are you saying ...”, “If I heard you correctly is that correct?” Look at it this way, showing interest in the other person may generate business. It can be the beginning of a new friendship or business relationship. They will think very highly of you because you listened to them by asking them questions. You may even help them solve a nagging problem!

LISA: How can teams better identify each others’ strengths and play to them?

SHARI: Realize that we have our own strengths and the value in teaming with others whose strengths are our weaknesses.

There are several ways to identify strengths: in a meeting, look at the interactions between team members. Who talks the most? Who takes charge? Who is quiet and consistently takes detailed notes? Who asks the detailed questions? The people that ask ‘why?’ are generally technical or subject matter experts. They deal with facts, figures and information. The people that ask ‘when?’ are task and bottom-line oriented; they are the ones that will take charge of the meeting. Those that ask ‘who?’ like to be in a group of people and want to know who they will be associating with. Those that ask ‘what?’ will perform the bulk of the work, and will be sure nothing slips through the cracks.

No one enjoys doing things they don’t like to do or are not good at – whether it be detail work, energizing the team, taking the lead or staying low key and consistently doing what needs to be done. High performing team members realize that diversity in team members’ thinking processes is critical to the success of the team, the company and even the individuals on the team.

LISA: You teach that what we say isn’t necessarily what the other person hears. What are some ways to bring better clarity?

SHARI: We all know about active listening. Active listening is really a misnomer – if you are active, you cannot be fully engaged and listening. Yes we need to tune out distractions and yes we need to ask the questions. We also need to paraphrase: mirrored thinking, reflective feelings or simplifying.

Perhaps the most under-utilized way to bring better clarity is to “tell your why” – the reason you are asking. Take a minute or two to explain yourself – what you’re thinking, what your perspective is, the path your mind has taken you to get to you to where you currently are, your thought process: give some background so your listener understands where you are coming from and your perspective.

For example, you are in a meeting discussing the merits of a proposed change. Someone says “we tried that before and it didn’t work.” Seems like a closed discussion. If you try and force your decision, a heated discussion could ensue, or frustration on hitting a brick wall. If the other person would add why it didn’t work, a meaningful discussion could develop, resulting in a brainstorming session and greater clarity of both communication and thought processes

LISA: Many MBAs fear failure. We’re high achievers or perfectionists. Give us an example of a failure that turned into an invaluable life lesson.

SHARI: Many years ago I was approached by a local training company to train for them. Knowing I would have to go through quite a rigorous training schedule [attend their 'how to give presentations' session, attend the class, assist the full-fledged instructors several times, go through two competency tests, train with another wannabe instructor, solo train with a seasoned instructor watching, then 'graduating' and training on my own] would take approximately two years and my own company sales would suffer, I decided to give it a try.

After nearly a year of training, I passed the first competency test with flying colors. On to the next part, which was to be certified to train one particular course. During this section, the trainers were more adamant that trainees follow their 'culture' which included: how to stand, how to talk, how to smile, how to interact with the participants, how to walk, how much time to spend on preparing for each session, when to sit [never!] and when to drink [subtly and only on a break], how much time was allocated for each portion of the class and how to dress [formal suits, preferably with a skirt and not pants].

It also included knowing everything about the participants that they wrote on their initial forms and how to cut discussions short. We were told to never ever go more than five minutes over time, and it was expected that instructors are in class at least one hour before class and stay for 30-60 minutes after class. All in all, it amounted to about 25-30 hours per week of my own time I was donating.

It was shortly into this portion of the training program that I felt I had lost my 'essence', my personality. I was much more constrained, felt less genuine and terrified I would not give the proper encouragement to the participant, or focus on the critical element of their talk. During the preparation for the final training, I asked the master trainer a question to help me better understand how I could give a particular set of instructions in 'their' method. He accused me of being defensive and wouldn't answer my question. During my review, I got zinged quite hard on that and they refused to let me train by myself. I had to go through co-training at least one more time. Reluctantly I agreed. That was a huge mistake. The stress manifested itself physically and mentally, plus my own company's revenues continued to decline as I was spending more and more time 'volunteering' my time to this training company. All of this was done without pay.

After co-training again, I was told I still was not good enough, and I would have to train at least once more, probably twice more [without pay] with a seasoned instructor sitting in the back of the room 'grading' me. In essence, I had failed again. It was at this time that I realized I had sacrificed too much of my own core personality and I lost my confidence in my own abilities. I decided I would not complete their training process. I could never be the straight-laced instructor they needed. I decided "I am who I am" - animated, high energy, excitable, not all-perfect and although cognizant of time not time-bound.

My uniqueness was the best part of me. I need an environment where my enthusiasm and animation are appreciated - and welcomed. It took me years, literally, to get "my style" back and have my true personality emerge.