



Good communication – a secret of success!

"The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel and misrepresentation."

— C. Northcote Parkinson, British naval historian.

The ability to communicate through speech is one of the defining human characteristics and has helped to drive our development through millennia. In business clear communication is of course vitally important but for a myriad of reasons we seem to have lost (and are still losing) the required skills.

Of course a proper conversation should involve an equal amount of listening to speaking and many people are actually not good listeners. This can be coached and most managers should consider attending such a course at some time to improve that part of their skill set. If you think of relationships between colleagues a manager must establish himself/herself as available to listen and especially to bad news – your direct reports should not be afraid to relay bad news or indeed critique your advice if the team is to flourish and develop.

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Business growth is built on partnerships with customers at one level or another and good communication must be at the heart of the relationship – be that B2B or end-users. Your distributors need constant reassurance and guidance (particularly at the start of the partnership) and you need to be fully informed of the ‘road ahead’ to avoid surprises. If you are selling to end-users, then you must be seen to be available for feedback and to provide assistance at all times. The ability to do this has increased exponentially with the arrival of social media platforms and leading companies are already fully using the potential to maintain an open conversation with their customers that can influence all aspects of the business from R&D to repeat sales and marketing. There are some dangers though which I will deal with shortly.



The best form of communication is undoubtedly face-to-face conversation because up to 90% of the message is transmitted non-verbally through body language, tone etc. Therefore, when we choose to communicate remotely we are taking a risk that part of our intended message will not be understood correctly. It used to be the case that the default remote method was to telephone but today it seems that people avoid to call contacts preferring often to email or text. This seems especially true if it is bad news that needs to be conveyed.

A written message particularly in brief format such as an email will inevitably be interpreted from the point of view of the reader. The tone of the message will be superimposed by the reader in-line with their preconceived opinions about the writer or the topic which often will be far from reality. This can lead to breakdowns in negotiations or a hardening of positions in dispute resolution. I would always counsel people to meet or at least telephone when dealing with such tricky scenarios. Often complicated issues require written documents but the sending of such materials must always be followed up quickly with a call or ideally a meeting to ensure proper understanding of your position.

Negotiation and dispute resolution both require complete understanding of both parties’ points of view and this demands a strong element of listening. Success will be achieved when both sides feel that they have gained some concessions – win: win. Finally, where a written response is required it is advisable to avoid immediately sending the email or text especially if the topic is contentious. Walk away and come back to it at a later time to re-

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read it, often you will be surprised by the aggression contained in the text and will soften the message before sending!

Perhaps the most critical form of communication in business is crisis management. The rule



here is to 'get out in front of the story'. That implies a quick initial response to the situation and continued updates as it develops. The communication must be seen to be clear, concise and accurate to convey the impression that the company is concerned and is dealing with the situation in an open and honest manner. Often the media is involved and written statements will be required but it

is again best to have spokespeople face-to-face with reporters to transmit the sentiments in a human fashion.

“If I’m selling to you, I speak your language. If I’m buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen!”

Willy Brandt, a former German Chancellor

This quote illustrates perfectly that sales’ success and indeed success in any form of business communication abroad will be increased significantly when the message is transmitted in the local language. Language skills are very poor in the U.K. and the reason always trotted out in our defence is that English is spoken or at least understood across the world. That may be case but when your competitor arrives to your foreign client speaking their language – who do you think will make a better impression? A translated text adds even further risk of misinterpretation to the situation.

So we come to an evaluation of the impact of technology in communication. Here there have been some extremely positive developments that have improved our ability to communicate including; social media that has expanded immensely the options for interaction with end-users; video conferencing that allows for calls to be enhanced because you regain at least some of the non-verbal content of a conversation; and mobile phones/email that mean that people are much more contactable and communication is faster than before. However, as mentioned, people tend to use email too often when a phone call or meeting would be better; video conferencing should not be used to replace

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business travel as a general rule because whilst an improvement on a phone call it cannot replace the personal visit to country; and the immediate contact offered by messenger apps can lead to a confusion between what is 'effective communication' as opposed to 'simply chatter'. There is a lot still to be said for the *considered response*.

I began this piece by saying that to communicate is to be human and that we should always try to transmit messages in a human fashion. Managers should be considerate and open in the manner that they communicate with staff; businesses should try to be conciliatory in discussions with partners; and we must always strive to listen and respond to our customers in order to constantly improve their experience with our product or service.

"The art of communication is the language of leadership."

— James Humes, former US Presidential speechwriter.

Written by Andrew Low of Discussing Business Ltd, August 2016.

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