

Get results with effective communication

By Mara Dresner

Karen is one of those employees every manager dreads. She's competent enough but always reluctant to try something new. She complains — a lot. She doesn't take criticism well. Jill is her manager and, as you might imagine, she dreaded conducting Karen's evaluation.

But instead of looking at the evaluation as simply an opportunity to present a list of all the things that Karen does wrong, Jill's goal was to make Karen feel like a valuable member of the team. With this in mind, she set out goals and expectations in a non-accusatory way. She asked that Karen study customer perceptions about their services and, in her own words, "listened in amazement as this person opened up with an awesome idea about education." In response to this straightforward communication, Jill says that Karen's lack of trust is dissipating and progress is being made.

Meryl Runion, founder and CEO of SpeakStrong, Inc. (www.powerpotentials.com), shares this story as an example of how poor communication can poison the workplace and keep employees and managers from achieving company goals. Just a few well-placed words can make a difference in productivity and the general culture of your business.

Although the names have been changed, this story is true. Jill says she remembered the following advice throughout the conversation with Karen: "Say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't be mean when you say it!"

Effective communication, says Runion, author of *Power Phrases: The Perfect Words to Say it Right and Get the Results You Want*, is simply "communication that gets results."

Although it sounds easy enough, she admits, there are numerous obstacles to effective communication. "The biggest barrier is thinking that being passive or being aggressive are your only options. Once people understand that there is a middle ground where they can be completely clear and direct but not aggressive, they become more willing to speak up," she

counsels. "Another big barrier is assumptions. If I assume you know what I know, I might not give you crucial information. If I assume I understand what you mean, I will not ask questions that will help me to really understand.

"Another big barrier is fear," adds Runion. "People are often afraid of hurting [other] people's feelings or violating some unstated rule of what we should and shouldn't talk about." Two other issues are that managers often don't communicate frequently enough with their staffs and don't provide sufficient detail when delegating tasks. This provides the opportunity for your staff to fill in the blanks on their own, often with misinformation.

Two ears, one mouth

But clear and frequent communication is not a one-way street. It's not enough to be articulate. Effective communication must consist of both speaking *and* listening.

"I like the old adage that we have two ears and one mouth, and we should use them in direct proportion. We should listen twice as much as we speak," says Tracy Peterson Turner, Ph.D., author of *5 Critical Communication Vehicles*. "A huge aspect of effective communication is learning to hear other people's messages. Being a good 'hearer' isn't the same as being a good listener. Listening requires participation and attention. A good listener has to suspend [his or her] own gray matter and tune into what is being said, [instead of] forming a response in their head and

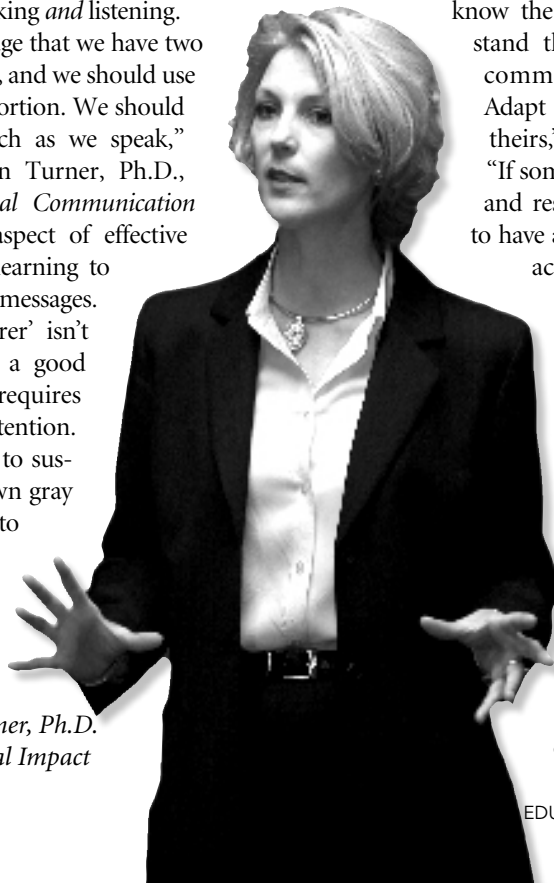
just acting as if they're listening. ... Good listening really fosters communication. It also shows respect to the person who's speaking."

Turner, who is the owner of Managerial Impact (www.mgr-impact.com), thinks that many managers "make far too many assumptions about their staff's ability, skills, knowledge and their investment in the company's well-being." Such assumptions can lead to misinterpreted messages or not enough information being conveyed about expectations.

Communication is not something you can do on autopilot. "Our ability to deliver and receive messages changes every day. It's influenced by so many factors," she says. Something as basic as whether you were stuck in traffic or you had a fight with a loved one can influence how you present and receive messages.

Turner points out that how well we know a person also affects our communication with them. "Take the time to get to know the person and understand their behavioral and communication styles. Adapt your styles to meet theirs," she recommends. "If someone tends to be shy and reserved, they're going to have a difficult time interacting with someone who is loud and emotional." That's not to say that the two styles won't ever be able work together, but it is going to take a while for the parties to begin to trust each other. And to further complicate matters, men and women often communicate in dif-

Tracy Peterson Turner, Ph.D.
Owner, Managerial Impact



ferent manners. There can even be special challenges depending on whether you're communicating with younger or older workers.

"Women like to tell the whole story and go into details of situations and problems. Men like to focus on what action needs to be taken," Runion explains. "Younger employees tend to be more casual. They don't give respect to older employees just because of their age. Respect needs to be earned. The casualness of younger employees can seem like an affront to older workers, who need to avoid taking the younger style personally."

Turner agrees. "I think there are absolutely differences. In today's business world, I think it's more between the generations than between the genders. I find myself thinking, 'What is this kid thinking? I never would have done something like that when I was his age.' It's like my mother just showed up!

"Styles change with the times. We're no longer Shakespearean authors and speakers, or writers of the Declaration of Independence or Ben Franklin speakers. The generations reflect that evolutionary process. It's simply a change in our culture. What behooves us is to look at those differences and focus on what we can learn from one another. The same with gender. Rather than divide it into us and them, observe the differences, see what's working and adapt your style from that," she advises.

Poor communication costly

Despite the challenges, effective communication is not only possible but essential to ensure that you and your staff share a mission and goals that everyone is working to achieve. The trick is to realize that it's an ongoing process that constantly must be monitored.

If you're doubting whether it's worth the effort, Runion warns that 86 percent of business failures are due to poor communication. She notes that other dangers include gossip, alienation, mistakes, missed opportunities and false expectations.

Turner also sees five costly results when businesses don't put effective communication atop their priority list.

"Missed deadlines, lost productivity, damaged relationships, misunderstandings and wasted time," she notes. "They all cost money. It might not be a realizable dollar amount, but wasting time is wasting a resource, and that costs money. The problem is that most managers don't even realize the consequences of communications shortcomings. They assume, in large part, if there is a miscommunication,



Meryl Runion
Founder and CEO, SpeakStrong, Inc.

it's their staff members' problem, that they have a lack of attention to detail, that their staff members have poor organizational skills."

Despite potentially dire consequences, good communication habits are relatively easy to develop, as long as you remain vigilant to what you're saying and how you're saying it. It's all about avoiding generalities and pat phrases.

For example, instead of telling an employee that he or she needs to improve customer service, offer specific instructions. Suggest three steps the employee can take to offer better service, such as addressing each customer by name or answering the phone before a certain number of rings.

Turner recommends telling employees *WHY* a certain assignment is important. If you ask a staff member to clean the stockroom, for example, explain that task will "increase efficiency when we look for products and help our customers faster. It gives [the employee] some buy-in."

If you want to become a better communicator, Turner offers the following steps:

■ **Get to know your staff.** Find out about what interests them about their jobs and the company.

■ **Listen to their ideas.** Find out what ideas your staff has for doing the job better, more effectively and more efficiently.

■ **Self-evaluate.** Honestly examine your own communication patterns and styles to see where you might be falling short.

Every encounter with your staff is an opportunity to improve communication. The advantages to your business are clear. "Effective communication is reciprocal. It goes both ways, rather than just the deliverer to the receiver. For that to happen, there must be time and space for questions and answers to take place," stresses Turner. "Effective communication only comes with commitment and time." ■

Meryl Runion's tips for communication success

Avoid these phrases:

- **If you improve your output, your job is assured.** (Promises like this can lead to lawsuits if the person needs to be let go for other reasons.)
- **Because I'm the boss.** (Pulling rank creates resistance.)
- **I hate to ask you but ...** (Managers need to avoid sounding as if they have no right to assign work to their employees.)
- **I need this sometime soon.** (Give a deadline.)
- **This isn't good enough.** (Feedback needs to be specific.)

Try these instead:

- **Your output needs to be improved to (specific measure) for you to continue working here. This needs to be improved by (date).** (There is no promise in that statement.)
- **Because it's needed for the success of our project.** (Explain things in terms of mission and priorities.)
- **I have a project for you.** (Be straightforward in delegation.)
- **I need this by Thursday at noon.** (Can you commit to that with your other projects and deadlines?)
- **What is your understanding of what I am asking you to do?**

Four communication habits to banish from the workplace:

- 1) **Sarcasm.** A manager brought me in after attending one of my seminars and the subject of sarcasm came up. Someone mentioned that it didn't feel safe to be open because of the sarcasm. Sarcasm is an ironic remark intended to wound. There is no value in wounding.
- 2) **Operating from one side of the story.** Too often managers will hear one person's report of an employee conflict and take sides without hearing both sides.
- 3) **Saving feedback on performance issues until the performance review.**
- 4) **Too much focus on what went wrong and not enough on how to make it right in the future.** A key phrase for any manager is: What are we going to do about this so it happens better next time?