

Are You Talkin' to Me?

By Carter Hammett

Whaddya mean the shipment went to Paris, France, and not Paris, Ontario?!"

Duh.

The amount of unnecessary conflict generated by well-intentioned but misunderstood communication is a prevalent and rude reality in the Canadian marketplace. How many times have you caught yourself in a face-off, using the words, "but what I'm saying is..." to someone who's missing the point of what you're trying to communicate?

Someone wise once said that North American conversation is a competitive exercise in which the first person to draw a breath is considered the listener. Now, in an information-service-based economy, this reality is proving to be both dated and costly. More work is evolving into project- and deadline-based tasks, which are really modified temporary assignments.

Teams are now operating as cross-functional units with multiple responsibilities and collaborative decision-making powers. This means a greater level of interdependency between everyone, from management to the front line, to ensure collective goals are met and understood. Simply put, everyone depends on effective communication.

There are three components to communication: verbal (the actual words), vocal (including pitch, volume and accent) and non-verbal. Combined, vocal and non-verbal communication account for 88% of all that is conveyed in conversation! Words actually account for a mere 12% by comparison. Remember what they say about smiling when speaking on the phone? It's all true. Remember that next time you are dealing with an irate colleague or customer over the phone.

Communication and its understanding is affected by several factors, including the frame of reference, emotional states, learning style, cultural etiquette and norms, as well as the situation in which it is presented.

Individual learning styles are another facet that should be taken into account. While all of us are some combination of auditory, kinesthetic or visual communicator, we all possess a dominant style that we prefer. Indeed, most of us are visual communicators, who tend to use phrases like, "I see," or "it looks good to me." These communicators tend to learn best with charts, graphs, Power Point presentations and the like, as well as needing to form mental pictures before information is completely processed and understood.

Auditory communicators are perhaps the biggest and best conversationalists. They are hungry for details and data, using verbs like "listen," "talk" and "debate," as well as phrases like, "I hear you." Chances are, these types will also be the co-workers with the radio on in their office as well.

Lastly, kinesthetic communicators are the "hands on" learners of your team; they learn things best through assigned activities and pepper their sentences with verbs like "feel," "touch," and "run." You're probably speaking to a kinesthetic communicator if you hear things like, "I'm trying to grasp that."

Grasping your own communication style is one thing, but how does your style affect others? The workplace is composed of diverse talent, and sensitive cross-cultural communication is becoming key in offices across the land. When dealing with internationally-educated colleagues whose first language may not be English, be respectful of different influences affecting communication and understanding.

Be conscious of the fact that other cultural groups have different perceptions of time, personal space and body language. It's generally a good idea to avoid slang and jargon, and to remember that someone repeating words back at you may be a sign of understanding rather than the opposite.

Perhaps one of the best communication models is simply, SMARTT (Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, transparent and timely), which contains all the essentials for communicating clearly to most colleagues at any level on the corporate food chain. Keep it simple and clear and most likely information will flow, intact and question-free, like a smile on a sunny day.

Effective communication is essential to the success of any business. It can resolve customer disputes, build teams, increase productivity and ultimately improve the bottom line. Got that? Good. Now go listen to someone!

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