Focus on the Fundamentals of Effective Communication within an Organization
Part One

By Dan Coughlin

Recently I was asked by a client to put together a full-day interactive seminar on how people can communicate more effectively with other employees inside their business. My first thought was that this would be like asking a scientist for a cure for the common cold.

By far and away the biggest issue inside of organizations is the way the individuals communicate with one another. I've worked now with over two hundred organizations. To prepare for my work, I have many times interviewed anywhere from five to twenty people inside the organization to better understand their perspectives. Generally speaking I ask them to share their thoughts with me on what makes the organization effective, what makes the organization ineffective or gets in the way of it being as effective as it could be, and what would make it more effective.

I've now interviewed more than eight hundred people in these organizations, and without exception the number one answer to what gets in the way of it being as effective as it could be is poor communication within the organization. I'm not talking about communicating with customers, prospects, and suppliers. I'm talking about communicating with fellow employees.

Clarifying Great Communication

If poor communication is so prevalent in organizations in over forty different industries, I'm wondering if great communication is even possible. Do people really know what they want? Take out a sheet of paper and write down your answer to this question:

Describe what you mean by great communication inside of a business. What does it look like?

You might want to think of someone you consider to be a great communicator, or think of what you imagine great communication looks like in a work environment. Take a few minutes right now and start jotting down what you think this really looks like. When you're done compare your answer to the realities of your workplace. What is similar and what is different? What do you think can be done to improve communication in your organization? Trust me when I say this is easier said than done.

How In-House Communication Affects Business Results

Think of business performance this way:

Talent + Energy + Time = Improved Results

Talent is the capacity to add value to other people, energy is the effort you put into creating and delivering that value, and time is the amount of time you concentrate your energy on creating and delivering that value to other people.

Keep in mind that your organization only has "x" amount of cumulative talent, energy, and time. If you waste a portion of that on poor communication, then it's gone and can't be retrieved. So now you have to achieve great results with a smaller amount of talent, energy, and time. Consequently, poor communication makes business performance much more difficult. In order to thwart off poor communication one thing that is important is to acknowledge what it looks like and to consciously work to avoid it.

Communication Approaches that Ruin Work Relationships

Not respecting the other person.
At the heart of ineffective communication is a true lack of respect for the other person. This could be conscious or subconscious, but either way it rears its ugly head and weakens relationships. To get ready for the seminar I started thinking about communication approaches that I have seen really damage working relationships within my clients' organizations and in organizations I've worked in. Here is what came to mind:

1. *Lack of Time Together One-on-One.*
Nothing ruins relationships faster and more effectively than not spending time together. This is true in families, in friendships, in neighborhoods, and in businesses. There's something about human nature that when people are not spending any quality time together negative thoughts and assumptions about each other start to creep in and negative walls start to build up. Forget that saying that "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Not true. Absence makes people jump to conclusions that may or may not be true. If you really want to hurt a relationship with a fellow employee, do everything you can not to spend any time with that person.

2. *The Danger of Drive-By Shootings (otherwise known as The Explosion of Public Humiliation, The Evils of Email, The Terror of Texts and Tweets, and The Fear of Facebook.)*
Imagine you're sitting in your house and a car goes by and then a bullet crashes through your window and gets lodged in the wall next to you. No one is physically hurt, but an enormous amount of fear is generated. With no explanation or warning, you have been attacked. Your neighbors all start to wonder if they are in danger as well or if this is just about you.

To a somewhat lesser degree, this is what happens when people get intensely criticized with no forewarning. They are sitting in a business meeting and suddenly the boss berates them in front of their peers. They are reading through their emails at the end of a long day and then they read one from their boss that tells them all the things they did wrong at a meeting with a customer. They are rifling through their text messages or tweets and they find one that calls them out personally as having been a poor performer and the text or tweet has also been sent to ten of

their peers. They go home to catch up on their Facebook postings and they find that someone has broken their trust and revealed something very confidential about them.

All of these "drive-by shootings" can ruin work relationships.

3. Beware of the Cute and Funny.

What you think is cute and funny may not be. My wife, Barb, and I had accidently broken a glass pane for our light fixture outside of our front door. Since it was under the roof we figured it would never get rained on. Then a bird built a nest twig by twig in there, and we thought that was cute and funny and so we didn't bother it. Then one day a neighbor smelled the nest burning while we talked on the front porch. Immediately I took out the nest. What we thought was cute and funny could have burned our house down

Is there something in your business that you think is cute and funny that is in reality really hurting a relationship? Perhaps you always tease a certain person for having grown up in a certain location. You think it's funny and the other person smiles every time it comes up, but in fact the person is really sick of hearing it and is getting really ticked off at you. Be aware of the cute and funny.

4. It's Not Just "Don't Drink and Drive," It's Also "Don't Drink and Talk."

We all know it's dangerous to drink and drive. It's also dangerous to your business relationships to drink and talk. After a few drinks, or more than a few drinks, it's amazing how stupid we can sound and not realize it. What we might have said in a coherent and reasonable manner while sober can be said while we're slurring our words and falling off our chair in ways that really, really damage working relationships.

When you're getting near to the point of drinking too much, it's best to claim a headache and head back to your hotel room by yourself. Otherwise, you might really end up with a business headache the next day.

5. Building a Fortress Around How Things are Done.

My least favorite meetings to attend are the ones when the person in charge says, "We really want to hear your ideas on this topic. Please share them with us." Then another person starts to share his or her perspective and immediately the first person says, "That won't work. Who else has a thought they want to share?" I've been in situations like this. I cringe when I think about them. So much talent in the room and yet the people in charge refused to listen or consider anything that didn't originate from their minds and mouths.

6. Throwing in Too Many Ideas Too Fast and Too Often.

The opposite of the fortress is The Idea Machine. This is the person who throws out ideas in every meeting. There are two problems with this approach.

If you're on a committee or at a department meeting and you always are the first one to put your idea on the table and then you add on ideas to everyone else's ideas, people will very quickly roll their eyes and shut down with any suggestion that you offer. Looking back I've done this many times myself. I was trying much too hard to prove that I could add value and so I added way, way, way too many suggestions for the group to be able to handle.

Another problem that occurs is when the person is the boss and his or her direct reports are on the receiving end of a constant flow of suggestions and ideas. They don't know which ideas the boss is just "suggesting" and which ones he or she is expecting to be carried out.

7. *The Devastating Energy Drain of Non-Stop Changes.*

Bob (the name has been changed to protect the guilty) was responsible for a very, very large piece of business. He loved making changes. He practically thrived on making changes just as every deadline on various projects expired. He was in charge and so he could get away with this kind of behavior. Project after project was postponed or delayed because of Bob's changes. The impact on the key business outcomes was devastating, and people on his team did everything they could to avoid him. Finally after a few years of this kind of behavior he was let go by his boss.

Before you make yet another change to a project think about the impact it might have on people.

8. *The Deadlines Don't Apply to Me Syndrome*

These are the people who are ALWAYS late on everything. If there is a deadline to fail meeting, they will fail at it. This is a remarkably effective way to ruin relationships because it not only sends the message that you don't care, but it also effects the work of a lot of other people.

9. *Constant Arm-Chair Quarterbacking (relentlessly criticizing other people).*

The easiest, and sometimes the highest paid, job in the world is to criticize other people, especially when it's behind their back. Unfortunately, or fortunately, the Boomerang Effect comes back to really hurt the relationship. The Boomerang Effect is created when the person being criticized finds out about it. Now the person is mad and has every reason to be mad. And thus ends another working relationship…Unless there are some apologies made, but we'll get to that in Part Two.

10. *Tone and Volume and Attitude Really Do Matter. (It's not just what you say; it's also how you say it.)*

Saying "Can you please help me with this report?" is quite different than "GET OVER HERE NOW AND HELP ME FIGURE OUT WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE. YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING RIGHT NOW ANYWAY."

BONUS: The Vacuum Created by Fake Listening and False Praise.

The only thing worse than communicating disrespectfully is to pretend you're communicating respectfully and you're really not. That's where you nod your head up and down and smile a lot and make eye contact and say things like, "That's great. Way to go. You're doing a terrific job," when in fact you aren't listening at all and you have no idea what the person has been doing. Remember The Boomerang Effect? People will eventually figure out what you're doing.

Conclusion
Which of these approaches do you feel are the most dangerous to ruining work relationships and why do you feel that way?

What other communication approaches have you found that really hurt working relationships?

By understanding what hurts relationships, we have a better chance of consciously avoiding those kinds of behaviors.

About Dan Coughlin

Dan Coughlin works with business leaders to improve their impact on teamwork, execution, innovation, and branding. His clients include RE/MAX Integra, McDonald's, Anheuser-Busch InBev, Abbott, GE, Marriott, Coca-Cola, Shell, Toyota, Boeing, Subway, BJC HealthCare, Shawnee Mission Medical Center, St. Louis Cardinals, Prudential, Land O'Lakes, ACE Hardware, Jack in the Box, Denny's, Land O'Lakes, Holder Construction, Kiewit Construction, McCarthy Building Companies, and more than 200 other organizations.

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