

Mistakes that Cause One-Sided Conversations

Paul, a member of the IT group, cornered his boss in a 'conversation' at the coffee station. Because the boss could not easily escape, Paul was taking the opportunity to overwhelm him with information. Of course Paul was not getting anywhere with his insensitive, one-sided communication style that ignored his listener's needs.

I hope that I'm not as tactless as Paul with his boss, but I confess that sometimes I have been just as ineffective when it comes to communicating with others. Christ-centered leaders are committed to enabling others to achieve their full potential. And central to this focus is responsible speaking. It is vital for us to communicate ideas, objectives, and methods effectively to others. This is important because our listeners need to be able respond appropriately in order to achieve their full potential.

Most leaders are all able to talk well, but this does not guarantee that real communication is taking place. It takes an awareness of barriers to listening, and practice to overcome those barriers for our listeners, whether the conversation is one-to-one or one-to-many.

Responsible Communication?

This series on Effective Communication Skills is all about how we can become "responsible" communicators. Why

responsible? Because it's all about *taking responsibility for your listeners to hear and understand what you say.*

Here are some mistakes that we make in speaking that create barriers to understanding:

1 – Overwhelming the listener with words.

Often leaders are so focused or short of time that we can spew out words like automatic rifle fire. Some leaders are also subconsciously anxious that any pause will give the listener an opening to nuke their message with an objection. The leader often overwhelms the listener with the result that the listener doesn't understand the message. Under these circumstances, the leader can think: "I told them what they need to know!" But communication did not happen.

What takes place within an overwhelmed listener? They neither have time to gather their thoughts, nor are they able to find a way to get more information or ask for help in understanding. The 'conversation' is one-way. The longer the conversation flows in one direction, the less relevant the message becomes to the listener. When this happens, the leader's frustration can rise, and the leader's normal reaction is to intensify one's speaking. Unfortunately, this approach usually eliminates any chance for healthy feedback. This kind of communication reminds is similar to the noise that comes from a PA system when it gives painful feedback. The feedback is picked up by the microphone and is amplified, emerging from the speaker only to be picked up and amplified more. The loop keeps going until somebody

turns the volume down.

What to do about it?

Think Quality not Quantity. People can only take in so much information at a time. Think out what your listener *needs* to know and limit what you say.

Relax. Avoid being in a rush. Make sure that you have time to help your listener understand. Give your listener opportunity to ask questions.

2 – Speaking only about what interests you.

In the communication process, it is important that your listener understands and responds appropriately to what you are saying. So the question is: how can you speak to create a path via the listener's interest so that understanding and an appropriate response take place? Whatever you are talking about, your listeners will have perspectives, concerns, objections or insights on the matter that are important to them. The key to engaging them is finding out what is important to them and addressing those issues. You may have to adapt what you say accordingly.

What to do about it?

Engage. Seek to engage in a dialogue, not a monologue. Be equal parties in the conversation.

Ask questions. This will enable you to determine whether your message is understood.

Invite questions. Do this as you go along. It will help

your listener help you know what they need.

3 – Ignoring the communication markers.

Communication markers are the non-verbal cues that the listener gives when you are attempting to communicate with them. In face-to-face conversations, these markers are primarily body language and tone of voice. These markers provide huge insights into what your listener is thinking. Being sensitive to the markers will help you steer a course that keeps them engaged.

Remember Paul? He demonstrated a serious lack of sensitivity when he trapped his boss in an attempt to get his attention. Unfortunately, when the boss backed up to the wall, folded his arms, and kept looking at his watch, Paul ignored the communication markers. He missed the obvious signals that said, "I've had enough. I need to go now."

What to do about it?

Demonstrate concern for the other person. Do your utmost to make them feel an important part of the conversation.

Learn the physical signals. There are good books that can help you understand body language, but some of it is very obvious. You won't miss it if you maintain your awareness of the other person.

Listen for verbal cues. Communications markers are verbal as well as physical. Listen for changes in tone of voice or message signals.

4 – Assuming your listener understands you.

If a leader “dumps” a message and rushes off, it is very easy to assume that the listeners have understood the message. There are many reasons that prevent understanding. Your listeners always have other things going on so they are hearing through their filters that can cause them not to tune in or to miss the point. Factors that may further obscure understanding are abstract concepts and the leader’s attempt to be diplomatic.

Several years ago, I was conducting one of my first leadership evaluations. In the final session with the leader, I needed to give him feedback on some leadership deficiencies that surfaced in his evaluation. I attempted to be diplomatic in my counsel to this leader. Weeks later, I found out that he interpreted my attempt at diplomacy as a compliment to his leadership style rather than counsel for change. I assumed that he had understood, and it was a costly mistake.

Communicating cross-culturally requires extra caution in our assumptions that messages are understood. We may be speaking with people for whom our language is not their first language. Issues of vocabulary and cultural implications can impede our attempts to communicate. Whatever the reason, there is always the possibility that others do not fully understand what we have said. The consequence can be misunderstanding, confusion, and even conflict.

What to do about it?

Keep it simple. Use plain language and avoid jargon and idioms that assume knowledge on the part of the listeners.

Make space for understanding. Speak in shorter segments so that the listener can assimilate what is said before you move on to the next idea.

5 – Making the listener responsible for understanding.

“If they don’t understand they should ask” may seem sensible, but it has at least two flaws:

First, people tend not to ask leaders out of fear; fear of looking silly, or perhaps fear of the leader.

Second, listeners often do not understand that they do not understand. Most people attach their own interpretation to a leader’s message that makes the most sense to them. But their interpretation is often quite different from the leader’s intended message.

When the message we intend to communicate seems clear to us, it can be difficult to appreciate that people may not have understood. After all it is so obvious, isn’t it?

Furthermore, may not feel it’s our job to make sure our listeners understand. However, remember that it benefits both you and the listener when they understand what you

are saying.

What to do about it?

Make understanding your goal. Measure effective communication based on whether the other person understands and can act accordingly.

Avoid assumptions: Many actions fail due to assumptions. Recognize your natural assumptions, declare them, and test them with your listeners.

Partnership: Communication only succeeds when both the speaker and the listener allow understanding to flow. Encourage your listeners to participate in that partnership. Be aware that they need the leader's permission to join in.

Reflection

Take a few moments to reflect on how you speak to others. Is your communication getting the results that you desire?

Turn your next attempt at communication into a dialogue. Ask the listeners specific questions to test understanding and encourage them to ask you questions. Try it and see what happens.

The Effective Communications Series

This article is one of series on effective communications in

the context of being a Christ-centered leader. You can access the others through the following links:

[Six Ways to Help Others Hear You](#)
[Are you an Engaging Speaker or “Mogadon Man”?](#)
[Are you a Responsible Listener?](#)

Also check out the [Modules](#) we offer on this subject and [more](#).

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