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So, What I Hear You Saying Is...

Skills and Professional Development



I was recently reminded about the importance of clear communication. I noticed that a certain employee was not in the office one afternoon. The next day I asked the office administrator if she had been notified since employees have been instructed to inform her of any schedule changes. We have been trying to emphasize to employees and their managers the importance of communicating schedule changes to a central point of contact. This is especially important because certain positions don't have a backup contact.

My inquiry took the form of the following email exchange:

Maryrose: "Did you have notice that [Janet] was leaving early?"

Administrator: "No."

Pretty straightforward and simple, right? Wrong. Janet's boss overheard the administrator talking about my inquiry and came to my office upset. She informed me that, in fact, Janet did give notice.

I followed up with the administrator and she stated that she interpreted my email as asking if she had prior notice of Janet's schedule absence. In that case, she did not. Hence, her response.

However, she then added that she was informed later the same day that Janet was leaving and not returning. I have to admit I was surprised she didn't include the rest of the story in her email response to me. People don't always see or hear the words that we actually write or say — a strange but true fact.

In the rush to respond to inquiries amidst heavy workloads, we all have a tendency to add or subtract

words and meanings in our daily conversation. Many times, people don't even remember the exact phrasing stated minutes before. Trial lawyers see this all the time, evidenced by the need for court reporters. How often do we wish that we had court reporters who could read back the transcripts of our conversations to confirm what was actually said in an exchange or a meeting? And yet, even with that ability, misunderstandings and misinterpretations would probably still occur.

So, what is the solution? First, I propose that we all slow down. Take the time to slowly read and digest the email. Too often, I have skimmed the email and fired away a response that did not fully address what the sender originally requested. And even more often, I have had another coworker storm into my office ready for battle because she did not scroll all the way down in the email to read the complete communication.

Emma Thompson, the British actress, has said: "Any problem, big or small... always seems to start with bad communication. Someone isn't listening."

In face-to-face communication, we need to really listen and hear what the speaker is saying. Many times we are already mentally formulating a response and we don't hear what was said. In social media, a 280-character tweet can circle the world and wreak communication havoc in minutes. How much more damage can be done in our relationships when words are not clearly spoken or heard?

Secondly, perhaps we can take a page out of the playbook for professional counselors. I have a counselor friend who often says to her patients: "So what I hear you saying is..." It's an effective way to confirm with a person that you understood what was said. Another possible response might be: "Are you saying (fill in how you interpret the speaker's statement)?"

Finally, if the response to a "yes or no" question has the potential to create concern, confusion, or cause you to initiate a series of actions, it might be good idea to follow up and get a more extensive response and gather the facts. I have learned in dealing with certain personnel that there is always more to learn beyond a "yes" or "no."

I know one person in particular who can answer with a "yes" or "no" but then in his mind, he concludes with "under these circumstances." When I approach him with questions, I make sure to follow up with other questions, such as: "Are there other situations in which your answer would change? And if so, what are they?"

We build relationships by making the effort to engage in clear and frequent communication.

In the words of Roy T. Bennett, author of *The Light in the Heart*,

"Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don't listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what's behind the words."

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