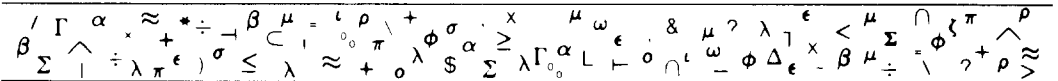


People Skills: Effective Communication— A Critical Skill for MS/OR Professionals

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Bob Levasseur's experience and background give him a unique perspective on one of the most important issues we face in the practice of management science: understanding and communicating with our customers. In his 20 years as a practitioner, he has been director of management sciences and then director of management education for a Fortune 50 company. Currently, he is an organization consultant, educator, writer, and speaker. He knows both the technical side of management science, where we TIMS/ORSA members are strong, and the human relations side, where we are weak. His columns address ways we can improve upon this weakness.

—Fred Murphy

My first column dealt with how to develop greater self-awareness (a basic skill on which interpersonal and group facilitation skills depend). In this column, I examine those interpersonal communication skills that are necessary for effective interaction with others. They consist of having the proper attitude, learning to ask the right questions, listening actively, communicating directly, and giving feedback appropriately.

Proper Attitude and Key Questions

To be effective in your interpersonal in-

teractions you must care about each person as a human being and treat each person with unconditional positive regard. You must also try to understand each person's point of view. To do this, you must ask appropriate questions and avoid drawing conclusions prematurely. The key questions to ask are

- (1) What is the current situation?
- (2) What is your vision of the ideal situation?
- (3) What actions would help to bridge the gap?

Fritz [1989] describes how asking these questions and exploring the answers to them can help people to create what they want in their lives. I use Fritz's powerful concepts regularly in my work.

Active Listening

How often do you listen with genuine interest to what someone else is trying to say? To be a good listener, you must learn to focus directly on what the other person is trying to communicate, both verbally

Try to understand each person's point of view.

and nonverbally. And you must take an active part in the conversation by paraphrasing the substance of what the other person says and reflecting the underlying feelings.

This hypothetical example illustrates the use of paraphrasing and reflecting: A senior manager (Fred) walks into the office of the MS/OR manager (Phil). He starts complaining about a problem he has with a new MS/OR report. At an appropriate moment in the conversation Phil says: "From what you've said so far, Fred, I gather that the biggest problem is with the graph used to display plant inventory levels." [This is paraphrasing.] "And, judging from your tone of voice, you're really upset about it." [This is reflecting.] Fred nods and asks Phil what he's going to do about it. Phil responds by asking the second key question. "Fred, if you could have exactly what you wanted, what would the inventory graph look like?" And he continues working with Fred to solve the problem.

To master the art of listening, you must

learn to focus your attention on the other person in this way. For those of you who see this as a major challenge, I offer this advice: Choose to be interested, not interesting!

Direct Communication

When it is your turn to speak, how do you say what you have to say? The answer is be brief, simple, clear, and honest.

The first three characteristics are self-explanatory. The last deserves a comment. When you are dishonest, people know instinctively that you are trying to manipulate them. As a result, they become defensive and they don't hear what you have to say or don't act on it. For example, when times are hard many managers try to hide the truth about planned cutbacks to prevent a decline in morale and a loss of productivity. Unfortunately, this practice creates confusion, added stress, and organizational paralysis as people struggle to reconcile business-as-usual messages with their sense of what is really going on. A more cost effective, humane approach is to deliver the hard messages in a timely and supportive way.

Constructive Feedback

Special rules apply to giving feedback. You must know and follow them to be effective. (As you read this, imagine that you are preparing to give feedback to a valued colleague.) When you give people your reactions to their behavior, you are dealing with a very sensitive subject. So, the first rule is not to give feedback unless the other person asks for it or agrees to hear it. Second, give the feedback in private, not in public. Third, give feedback only about behavior the person can control and therefore change. Fourth, criticize behavior, not

the person's character. Fifth, describe the behavior as you see it and your reaction to it. Sixth, be specific: cite actual instances supported by the facts as you see them. Seventh, search for the truth by encouraging the other person to present the facts as he or she sees them. Eighth, suggest alternate behavior. Finally, be brief, simple, clear, and honest.

Conclusion

Effective communication is a key skill for MS/OR professionals who want to build good working relationships and influence others. To communicate effectively, a person must have the proper attitude, learn to ask the right questions, listen actively, communicate directly, and give feedback appropriately. I hope my suggestions on how to do this prove useful to you.

In my next column, I will discuss the critical group facilitation skills needed to tap the full potential of management teams, task forces, and other work groups.

References

Fritz, Robert 1989, *The Path of Least Resistance*, Fawcett Columbine, New York.