

MANAGEMENT

A Workplace Hazard: Communication

By ANN LATHAM

Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus. But that's only the beginning.

Many people have written about the gender gap in communication, but gender is not the only factor that makes communication difficult.

Picture this: You are talking to somebody. The other person is nodding. You think, 'good, this person agrees with me,' and you feel encouraged to continue talking. Which you gladly proceed to do. Now picture this: You are listening to somebody. You are nodding and thinking, 'yes, yes, OK, hurry up and finish because I want to talk!'

Or perhaps you have heard this one before, "I thought you meant ...".

We have all witnessed countless examples of miscommunication, and yet, amazingly, we all act as if they were rare. We walk into a room full of people and join in the conversation assuming we will be understood. We discuss complex emotions and life-long dreams with a few half-baked sentences, allowing a well-timed nod to reassure us that the listener knows *exactly* what we mean. We reach consensus and walk away from meetings without realizing that everyone has a different interpretation of the agreement reached.

Simply put, we act as if men were not from Mars. As if everyone shared our outlook. As if

communication were easy!

Just think about how casually we open our mouths and start to speak. Perhaps if you take a few minutes to consider the hazards and the limited likelihood of successful communication, you would look both ways before speaking. Consider the following:

- The words themselves
- The non-verbal behaviors that surround the words, and
- The fact that words are uttered and interpreted by people (Let's not even mention the words that are lost in the breeze and never heard.)

Words

Words are imprecise and have multiple meanings. Sentences can be ambiguous:

Mr. Sims saw the cat jump off the roof while gardening; Guilt, vengeance, and bitterness can be emotionally destructive to you and your children. You must get rid of them. 'Nough said?

Non Verbals

Smile the next time you tell someone you are upset with their behavior and watch their confusion as their brain tries to reconcile the conflicting messages. Body language, gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice have a strong impact on communication. But you knew that.

However, it goes further than you might think. Studies have shown that body movements of the *listener* affect the message.

Students, ostensibly testing the performance of headphones during jarring and movement, were instructed to listen while moving their heads back and forth (shaking their heads); moving their heads up and down (nodding); or not moving at all.

Follow-up questions revealed that the nodders were the most supportive of a proposal they heard during the test, and the shakers were the most negative. Non-verbal clues abound. Are we all equally adept at picking them up?

People

People are complex and their personal differences – gender, culture, experience, knowledge, values, interests, and more — affect how they hear, see and interpret a message. Even mood and concerns of the moment have a big impact. Perceptions of the other person and that person's agenda add one more level of distortion.

Picture each person with a filter surrounding them and watch the words and non-verbal messages bounce and distort upon entrance.

Convinced?

We start with ambiguous sounds, and present them to people focused on and ready to absorb totally different things. And yet, for some reason, we assume we will communicate successfully. We mostly act as if they are ourselves.

We act as if they share our

'common sense,' a strange name for our unique and total cumulative learning. We act as if they are ready to hear what we are ready to say.

Osmo Wiio, a Finnish researcher specializing in human communication, penned these, among other, Murphysque laws of communication:

- Communication usually fails, except by accident;
- If you are content with your message, communication certainly fails (because if you are content you have fashioned the message perfectly for yourself, not others);
- There is always someone who knows better than you what you meant.

So is it All Hopeless?

The first step toward reducing miscommunication is to realize that miscommunication is almost guaranteed. If you expect miscommunication, you can watch for it, anticipate it, and clarify. Take these to heart, and you will fare reasonably well. Expect miscommunication. Listen carefully, and ask those clarifying questions.

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