

Achieving Results

A Black Diamond Associates Publication

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Communications

My daughter recently got her driver's learner's permit. For the past several weeks, I have been the white-knuckled adult co-pilot of a 15-year-old student driver "wannabe." My new role as driver's ed teacher has heightened my awareness of the importance of exceptional communication. In this case, it can mean the difference between life and death – literally!

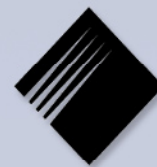


I work with successful professionals and we frequently focus on communication effectiveness. When I ask, "What percentage of your job relies on effective communication," they usually will respond "all of it." And, when asked "On a scale of 1-10, how well do you think you communicate," most people (taken from the sample of those with whom I work) think they are pretty good. They typically rate themselves a 7 or an 8. Yet the root cause of most problems in any organization can be traced to a breakdown in communication. So if everyone is so good, why is there a problem?

The causes of poor communication are no doubt complex. They involve language, culture, behavior style, etiquette, process, procedures, environment and technology, to name a few. However, one common underlying factor that contributes to the failure to communicate is our habit of making assumptions.

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate" ~ from the 1967 film Cool Hand Luke.

We all fall into the pit of assuming all the time. On day one of my daughter's driving lessons, I pulled into a neighborhood near our home so she could practice by taking a simpler route back to our house. I assumed that she knew to take the back road



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A s s o c i a t e s

Successful relationships – both personal and professional – depend on effective communication. In business, this means relationships with our customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders and community are improved when our ability to communicate effectively improves. Unfortunately, we tend to focus on efficiency instead of effectiveness and problems surely follow.

If your company could benefit from stronger relationships, give Black Diamond a call. We help executives and organizations gain a better understanding of how they communicate and how they can improve. The result is fewer problems and healthier relationships – and both lead to increased profitability.

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home. I assumed she didn't have the confidence to attempt the busier main road. I assumed she knew her right from her left. I assumed if I started yelling she'd recognize that her course of action needed adjusting. When she didn't begin to turn right, I continued to repeat "turn right" with increasing volume and urgency. As she entered the street heading left, I screamed "turn right!" at which point she stopped the car halfway into the lane, threw up her hands and yelled "Ahhhh" right back at me! With the oncoming traffic approaching, instructions were flying as fast as panic was setting in.

In business, we face "oncoming traffic" all the time. Combatting competitors' tactics, responding to customers' needs, meeting looming deadlines, solving operating problems and managing within financial constraints are daily challenges that require exceptional communication but get in the way of it at the same time. Under these pressures, we short change the most important part of the communication equation. We fail to seek first to understand before seeking to be understood (a habit of highly effective people as noted by Stephen Covey in his books *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The Eighth Habit*.) In lieu of seeking to understand, we assume we understand. I'm sure I don't have to remind you what assuming makes us!

"The problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred." ~ George Bernard Shaw

Let's consider three ways where assuming can get us in trouble:

Assuming they "heard" you. When people are physically within earshot and able to hear we assume that our words have registered as we intended. Even though a person is physically able to hear does not mean they are mentally tuned in. Ask any parent who has hollered at a child in front of a TV and they'll know exactly what I'm referring to. Technology complicates communications as much as it facilitates it. Sending an email – even if you confirm with a "read receipt" – does not mean the person on the "to" line actually received and read the message. This doesn't stop us from assuming they did.

Take responsibility for the success of the process by confirming your message was heard or read. Seeking first to understand involves identifying whether any barriers to communication exist. Ask questions, request a reply or wait for a response to assure that you were heard.

Assuming they "understood" you. People who self-assess as a 7 or 8 on a 10 point scale of communication effectiveness will often assume that they clearly articulate what they intend and that there is only one way to interpret their message. As we all know, in many cases, they are wrong. Words have many meanings and words only make up 7% of what is being communicated. While Mr. "7-8 out of 10 communicator" is busy putting subject and verb together, Mr. Listener is busy assessing the emotions, facial expressions, body language and tone of the message against his own experience and preconceived notion of what is being said.

Taking time to understand where your recipient is before you speak will always increase communication effectiveness. Had I stopped to ask my daughter to explain to me if she knew how to get home, how she planned to get there, and if she had any questions before she put the car in drive, we may have avoided panic in the face of oncoming traffic.

Assuming they "agree" with you. The purpose of any form of communication is to elicit some form of behavioral response or action. People may hear you and understand you but not agree with you so you may not get the response or action you desire. In this case, you may be clear, but not compelling.

Everyone views the world through their own lens. That lens, or perspective, is a function of years of experience and conditioning. While no two people are exactly alike, we tend to approach communication as if everyone is exactly alike – and that is, exactly like me! Seeking first to understand recognizes the inherent differences between people and uses that recognition to improve communication.

The explosion of communications technologies since the mid-1990s has aided and interrupted effective communication. Business people have grown dependent on email and texting as efficiency tools. In many ways, these tools have helped us become more efficient. However, we have become addicted to the speed at which technology enables communication and falsely created an expectation that the rest of the process can move just as fast. But understanding others' knowledge, feelings and bias about a topic takes time and no amount of innovation can change that.

My advice for improving communication is the same I give the new driver – slow down. You may think you don't have time to "seek first to understand" but you inevitably have time to address the problems that speeding through the communication process can cause.