



Interpersonal Communications in the Communications Center

It seems a bit ironic that often the root cause of poor morale in a **Communications** Center is a lack of effective interpersonal **communications**. Messages verbal and nonverbal are sent but often what is sent is not what is received. Somewhere between the sender and the receiver static intervenes to distort the message. When interpersonal communications break down so do relationships; when relationships break down the result is stress, distrust and other symptoms of poor morale, such as tardiness, absenteeism and turnover. The majority of management experts agree that most management problems are interpersonal communications problems.

Effective interpersonal communications requires an atmosphere of mutual respect and a desire for open and honest dialogue. A closed, non-supportive environment breaks down interpersonal communications; an open, supportive environment enhances interpersonal communications.

To facilitate an open, supportive environment all members of the Communications Center team need to employ meaningful downward and upward communication. Both are equally important and dependent upon each other.

Downward communication is providing clear instructions, directions, ideas and suggestions. Whenever possible the “why” behind decisions and actions should be clearly explained so that acceptance and understanding replaces misunderstanding and resistance. When confronted with change, adults typically believe they have a right to know the reason for the change. Studies have shown that employees in today’s workforce want to be viewed as valued participants in the process, not just subservient receivers of orders.

Upward communications is soliciting ideas, suggestions and comments from others. A directive or other “message” may be sent but unless the sender knows the message was received, true communication does not occur. Soliciting feedback from others helps to clear up communications breakdowns and enhances understanding and acceptance.

Soliciting Feedback

Feedback is solicited by using the basic techniques of active listening to get the message across. Open-ended questions are questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no" requiring the speaker to provide more information. Paraphrasing is a brief rephrasing of information provided by the speaker. The use of paraphrasing assists the listener's understanding and also helps the speaker to clarify main points and concerns. Reflecting feelings is repeating in a short declarative statement the emotions or feelings which the speaker is communicating directly or indirectly. It is listening empathetically (not sympathetically) in an effort to determine where the speaker is coming from. It is important to remember that there is a difference between empathy and sympathy. Empathy is putting oneself in the other person's shoes to gain a sense of how they feel; sympathy is feeling sorry for the other person. Paraphrasing and reflecting feelings are excellent techniques to clear up confusion and defuse potential communications breakdowns.

Delivering Feedback

How feedback is delivered also impacts the effectiveness of the communications cycle. For instance, simply complaining to others about "the way things are around here" offers no relief from the situation – it only serves to "stir the pot". Logically explaining the perceived problem and providing a recommended solution provides a higher impact. The feedback will be taken more seriously and interpersonal communications will flow more effectively if complaining is replaced by explaining and recommending using the basic techniques of active listening to get the message across.

Tone/Manner of Speech & Nonverbal Communications

Sometimes it's not what is said, but how it's said that sets the tone for interpersonal communications. For instance, just by responding "hello" at the start of a conversation a speaker can convey either pleasure at hearing from the person (happy, up-beat tone) or displeasure (flat, "oh no, it's you" type tone guaranteed to put a damper on the conversation!). The meaning of spoken words is interpreted by the tone/manner in which they are delivered.

Nonverbal communications or body language can also subconsciously convey messages and set a positive or negative tone for interpersonal communications. Because as much as 90 percent of communications is nonverbal, facial expressions, gestures or even something as subtle as seating arrangements can have an impact. For instance, let's say a manager brings an employee into his office for a discussion. Placing the employee across the desk, face to face conveys confrontation (best used for a "ship up or shape out discussion"); angling the chairs to sit side by side conveys rapport (best used for a "let's get together and work things out" discussion). During the discussion, leaning forward, with hands open conveys interest & careful listening; leaning away with arms folded over the chest conveys disinterest or disagreement. The communications tone is set before a word has been said.

Tone/manner of speech and body language can greatly impact the communications cycle. Some additional guaranteed communications breakers are the sarcastic comment and the incredulous response (a quizzical look of disbelief and shock at the “stupidity” of what is being said). Both humiliate people and only serve to damage relationships and stifle effective interpersonal communications. Next time a trainee seems reluctant to ask questions or a subordinate or coworker “shuts down” or reacts negatively during a discussion, ask yourself, “Could it be that my actions or reactions are sending signals that I think their questions or opinions are stupid or baseless? Remember - sometimes actions **can** speak louder than words.

Most management problems are interpersonal communications problems that can be solved by applying active listening techniques and remaining cognizant of tone/manner of speech and body language. When both the sender and receiver are truly listening an atmosphere of mutual respect and a desire for open and honest dialogue is fostered. The “static” clears up – what is sent is what is received - and stress, distrust and other symptoms of poor morale are greatly reduced.

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Quiz

CDE Article – Interpersonal Communications

Name: _____ Date: _____

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1. Encourages others to bring forth ideas and suggestions
 - a. Downward communications
 - b. Upward communications

2. “Walking a mile in someone else’s shoes” is an example of
 - a. Sympathy
 - b. Empathy

3. Leaning forward during a conversation conveys
 - a. Interest
 - b. Indifference

4. It’s not *what* is said but *how* it is said shows use of
 - a. Non-verbal cues
 - b. Tone

5. Lack of communications is usually the cause of low morale.
 - a. True
 - b. False