

Talk sharp: Send the right message at work

By Sheila R. Wheeler



One-on-one conversations have to be dynamic to rise above the din of e-mails, texts and social-status updates vying for our attention in today's technology-driven world.

But the better we get at tweeting, the worse we get at verbalizing what we mean, especially in the workplace, according to communication experts. A host of new self-help books aims to help workers become more effective speakers, from nailing that first job interview to negotiating a raise.

"My clients are telling me that people don't know how to talk to one another anymore," says Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts, a business, technology and e-mail-writing coach and author of "Speaking Your Way to Success."

The interactions are either too quick or too long. Sometimes you can't find an employee who can write more than a 140-character tweet, Lindsell-Roberts says. Then there's the chief executive who "brain dumps" and doesn't get to the point. Twenty-somethings are more likely to view a text or instant message as an actual conversation, while baby boomers aren't.

"There's a large disparity today in the way people are communicating," Lindsell-Roberts says. "It's causing a lot of rifts in the workplace, where we are more likely now to have numerous generations working together in the same office."

Each generation's communication expectations must be honored, but some are more appropriate, depending on the situation.

Problems that require immediate solutions should be handled face to face, such as when an employee is reprimanded, Lindsell-Roberts says. Use a telephone call to schedule an appointment, while sincere thank-you notes should be handwritten. Even though e-mails are convenient and easy to send, a person may not read it for minutes, hours or even a day.

"The most important thing is that people have to understand their audience," she says. "What is that person or group of people's level of understanding? What is their relationship to you? Are they a subordinate or a manager?"

No matter how advanced communications technology gets, speaking continues to be critical to a person's success.

One of Lindsell-Roberts' favorite suggestions to presenters is to replace PowerPoint presentations with audio, video, audience participation or a live presentation. She prefers creating storyboards, a display broken into segments of talking points and visuals.

"No one is there to watch that; they are there to learn something from you."

For those interviewing for a job, it's important to use strong verbal skills, as well.

Ask questions about the company to show interest: "What challenges does the company face, and how do you plan to meet those challenges?" Ask questions about the interviewer: "What is your management style?" Ask about the position: "What are the keys to being successful in this position?" And when the interview is done, ask what the interviewer has learned about you today that he/she thinks makes you a viable candidate.

"That way, before you walk out the door, you are encouraging them to recap all the positive things they heard about you and have you leave on a very strong, positive note," says Lindsell-Roberts. "It's very empowering."

In closing, get permission to follow up in a week or two through either a phone call or e-mail, whichever they prefer.

Choose words carefully

Want to convince a manager that a specific course of action (i.e., yours) is better than another (i.e., his or hers)? Chris St. Hilaire, a message strategist and author of "27 Powers of Persuasion: Simple Strategies to Seduce Audiences & Win Allies," says not to use the word "but." As in, "I don't disagree with you, but . . ."

The word "sets the stage for making the listener wrong, defensive and more entrenched in their own ideas instead of being open to others," says St. Hilaire.

The subordinate that gets heard and is more likely to be agreed with should say: "I like your idea, and ..."

"Even if you are adding a different twist on their idea, the word 'and' sets the framework up for the listener to be right and gets you 50 percent closer to being where you need to be," St. Hilaire says.

Use the phrase "from my perspective" instead of "let me tell you the way it is," St. Hilaire says. One orders and discounts, while the other builds and sets up both the listener and speaker's viewpoints on equal footing.

"The key to successful communication is improvisation, building on each other's ideas, and honoring others before you add your own," he says.

When trying to persuade upper-level managers to take a specific course of action, acknowledging their situation will open them up to hearing your suggestions.

"A lot of times people think that CEOs and others in positions of power are the most secure people in the company," says Hilaire. "In fact, they are the most insecure because they are the ones on the line. It may seem like they are making fewer decisions, but they are making big ones that need to be weighed."

St. Hilaire says he believes that communication and persuasion are an art and craft.

"The natural palette that God gives you to have ideas that eventually change things is the art," he says. "The craft is communicating and getting your ideas heard so the best ones can rise to the surface. That is learnable and teachable."

Speak the truth

Is being a master communicator manipulative? Yes, says Scott Snair, author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Power Words." But it's not deceptive.

"I'm not advocating how to lie and get away with it," Snair says. "But there is a way to manipulate people and be very disarming and say 100 percent the truth."

One of Snair's favorite tools for negotiation and persuasion in the workplace: "Would you do me a favor?"

"No matter the request, you are not putting it in a frame that says 'I'm in charge of you.' Instead you are empowering the other person to help you."

It irks Snair when he sees people ask "How are you doing?" and then keep walking before a response is given. Take the time to let someone know you appreciate them even if you don't have time to chat.

"Occasionally I get teased for it, but I always say to people, 'Hi, it's great to see you.' It really puts the whole day in a better light."

Say it better

People who have trouble getting their point across, have been misunderstood or offended others probably are using the wrong words. But what are the right words? John Boswell offers some in the slim book, "What to Say to Get Your Way: The Magic Words that Guarantee Better, More Effective Communication" (\$14.99, St. Martin's Press, 2010). Here's a sampling:

Inject yourself

Don't say: "You are . . .," "You do . . .," "You don't . . ." "That's insulting."

Say: "I feel that . . .," "I think that . . .," "I know that . . .," "I believe that. . .," "I find that hurtful."

Convince rather than confront

Don't say: "That's a terrible idea."

Say: "Can I talk you out of it?"

Don't say: "You need to . . .," "You must . . ."

Say: "You might . . .," "You could . . ."

Don't say: "You're not helping."

Say: "Could you help me?"

Don't say: "Here's what you need to do."

Say: "Can I make a suggestion?"

Avoid being negative

Don't say: "Don't disappoint me."

Say: "I'm counting on you."

Don't say: "That's not the way I see it."

Say: "I have a different view."

Don't say: "That's not what I said."

Say: "Let me explain again."