

Communicate Dynamically through ASKING instead of TELLING!

By Chrissie Webber

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'TELL ME MORE.....!'

Communicate Dynamically through ASKING instead of TELLING!

In today's pressurised world of business, where time is nearly always in short supply, effective and dynamic communication is essential in ensuring successful relationships and booming productivity. These days, building healthy business partnerships with colleagues, peers, bosses, customers and suppliers requires far more emphasis to be placed on how we communicate with each other; all too often, we find ourselves frustrated at being unable to reach agreements, which inevitably endanger the relationship and prevent us from achieving a win-win situation.

Most people involved in business will find themselves needing, at some point, for example, to sell an idea, a product, a course of action – and the skills required to do this successfully are seldom innate. The 'core skills' that a professional communicator must have when face-to-face with others include:

-  Opening and sustaining a dialogue
-  Listening and probing for needs
-  Handling questions
-  Bringing the dialogue to a productive and satisfactory close

By developing these skills, our success increases naturally. Skill development takes practice and with practice these skills can become your own.

Striving to Identify NEEDS – 'The Socratic Method'

Careful examination of the communication process identifies that NEEDS lie at the core of all situations. A skilful communicator enables the process of identifying needs in other people and situations by following the method set out by the philosopher Socrates. Socrates insisted, despite the contrary claims of his contemporaries, that he was not an authority regarding anything. Almost without exception, he held the view that all he tried to do was understand the essence of whatever issue or question that was being discussed.

Consequently, the 'Socratic Method' of communicating is a conversation, a discussion, where two or more people assist one another in finding the answers to their questions and issues. Great communication is rooted in the fundamental skill of helping others articulate their needs; helping

them clarify exactly what they want and WHY they want it – a process whereby they talk and we listen and probe, actively and skilfully.

The Process

To better understand the process, it is important to identify its main components and discuss each one in turn, bearing in mind that these components are intermingled throughout the flow of the conversation. To the other person, they should not seem intrusive – in fact, when the techniques are used properly, people perceive a true regard for them and their needs.

Identifying NEEDS - Components of the Process

1. Open the dialogue – ‘Get them talking’

If you are the one who has instigated the dialogue, the responsibility rests with you to get the conversation going. In order for you to listen, you must get the other person to talk. ‘The Opener’ is a carefully constructed invitation to the other person to talk. This can sometimes be difficult since the other person has consented to see you and therefore expects you to talk! Get things flowing by using this ‘Opener’ – the components of which are:

- you are prepared to proceed
- the other person is invited to share their thoughts first
- the other person will have the benefit of a more productive meeting

‘EXAMPLE OF AN OPENER’:

“I’VE COME PREPARED TO DISCUSS_____. HOWEVER, YOU MAY WANT TO TALK ABOUT OTHER THINGS AS WELL. SO, IF YOU COULD START WITH WHAT’S MOST IMPORTANT IT WILL ENSURE THAT THIS MEETING WILL BE MORE PRODUCTIVE FOR YOU”

2. Active Listening – Playback

In any conversation, active listening is more than merely paying attention. To listen actively is to work, mentally and verbally, to ensure that other person’s meaning is understood. That assurance comes from the other person. To be sure you have understood what you’ve been hearing, you should playback what you have heard. Playback is introduced by such phrases as:

“If I understand you correctly.....”

“Let me see if I have got this.....”

“In other words, what you’re saying is.....”

The advantages for using playback is to demonstrate to the other person that you have really listened and understood, to trigger more information and to reach agreement on what’s been said.

Don’t forget that other skills, such as giving non-verbal listening signs and note-taking show that your listening is truly active and responsive.

3. Identifying Needs

Three main tools help identify these important needs:

a. Closed/Direct Questions

Closed questions target specific information that you need at a certain point in the dialogue to elicit specific facts and details. Too often, these closed questions are the main tools used when communication takes place. They are an essential tool, but used exclusively, can be extremely limiting. Closed questions place responsibility on your shoulders to come up with all the questions.

How much?

How many?

How often?

Who?

Where?

When?

What kind?

Questions that produce a simple 'Yes' or 'No'

b. Open Questions

These questions invite the other person to talk at length. Most commonly used are:

What.....?

Why.....?

How.....?

Though questions beginning with these words can be extremely valuable, they still place a burden on you to think of and create a full question.

c. Socratic Questions

Socratic questions are also open-ended. They invite the other person to talk freely. They make no assumptions about what the other person should talk about and place no burden on you to formulate the question.

Five very specific Socratic questions are:

"Tell me more."

"What else should I know?"

"Why do you say that?"

Echo-back (repeating back a word or phrase used in the preceding sentence in the form of a question)

"For Example?"

4. Draw out underlying feelings

Any dialogue and actions from it will be influenced by human feelings. A current of feeling will always run through the discussion, irrespective of the many facts that describes the needs. Indeed, there will very likely be some emotional response to the needs. The other person may have a strong positive desire to satisfy the need or indeed, be harbouring some negativity towards it. Either way, the needs are always connected to feelings and emotions.

Ultimately, it is these feelings that will dictate the outcome of the dialogue. The danger, of course, is that in most business environments, feelings tend to remain unspoken. The other person might not know you very well – indeed, they might not want to 'give anything away' or appear over eager. Many reasons will keep the other person from disclosing feelings to you.

Useful ways of surfacing these hidden feelings are through using 'motivator' probes:

“What bothers you most.....?”

“I sense concern.....”

“I can see you’re frustrated.....”

If the other person begins to talk about their feelings behind their needs, encourage further discussion – and stay with the feelings! If the relationship of trust has been building throughout the dialogue, the other person is likely to reveal these hidden emotional motivators. Once this hidden concern is revealed – anxiety, worry, frustration, disappointment, desire – whatever – you are an ally! Confidence between the two grows even further. This positive element in your relationship now makes you unique – a skilled and professional communicator.

Handling Questions Effectively - Components of the Process

Questions asked by the other person are signs that the conversation is progressing. If you handle these questions effectively, you may soon find yourself in a position to bring the dialogue to a satisfactory and positive close.

The skill is in finding out WHY the question is being asked so that your answer is correctly positioned. By drawing out the interest behind the question or statement, you gather valuable information to help the conversation continue.

The formula:

- supply a short answer, open-ended if possible, and then add
- “WHY DO YOU ASK?”

Closing The Dialogue- Satisfactorily and Productively

A conversation is closed when all parties decide on steps to take towards the mutually agreed action. A Socratic ‘close’ requires these steps:

- Summarise the decisions
- Reaffirm agreements on any sub-decisions
- Close by specifying the next steps
- Nail down the details (e.g. dates, times, locations, numbers, costs, etc).

Conclusion

To be effective in communicating ‘socratically’, it is essential to master the word skills outlined and to understand the philosophy behind the method – it is down to you to steer the dialogue between you in such a way as to lead the other person to a logical conclusion. Such a dynamic, and ultimately undemanding communication technique inevitably builds lasting relationships and ensures business success!

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