

Performex

**LISTENING, SUPPORTING,
DIFFERING & COMMITMENT**

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LISTENING, SUPPORTING, DIFFERING & COMMITMENT

Effective communication relies on four major factors to be successful. Listening, supporting, differing and commitment. Each separate skill needs to be understood to eliminate conflicts and arrive at "win-win" decisions.

LISTENING

Active listening is most noticeable by its absence. When team members carry on more than one conversation at a time, interrupt one another, and jump from one subject to another, you can be sure people are not listening to one another. The consequences of this failure are that vital information gets lost and ideas are not properly explored, leading to hasty and poor selection of alternatives. The failure of people to listen to one another is also very time-consuming because we tend to repeat ourselves until we feel we've been heard.

Until quite recently, interpersonal skills were rarely, if ever, taught either in schools or in job training. This is particularly and ironically true of listening. Most of us probably spend more time listening than all the other interpersonal skills and learning behaviors combined, yet listening is the skill we do most poorly.

The difficulty of effective listening stems from the fact that we think far faster than we speak. The average rate of speech for most Americans is 125 words per minute, while the brain can process the language of our thoughts at an extremely high speed. Consequently, since the words we listen to arrive slowly, our brain has surplus time for other things. These "other things" include thinking up an argument to the

speaker's position, constructing a question which can't be answered, looking for hidden motives, evaluating the speaker, or generally paying attention to something other than what the speaker is saying. Considering the complexities and difficulties of oral communication, it's a wonder it works at all.

However, much can be done to overcome the difficulties of effective listening. Effective listening can be improved when four activities are performed with the "surplus time" we have while listening. These are:

- Anticipate where the conversation is leading.
- Objectively weigh the evidence being presented.
- Periodically review and summarize what is being said, and
- Pay attention to the non-verbal behavior as well as the verbal.

Carl Rogers proposed that a key factor in poor communication is the tendency to critically judge and evaluate the speaker and his expressions. Not only is the listener indulging in "selective" listening, such as "I like this," or, "I don't approve of that," but it is likely to lead to the speaker attempting to justify, rationalize, defend, or protect his position. As a remedy, Rogers suggested "empathic" listening -- the listener listens to understand the speaker from the speaker's point of view. Doing this, the listener is able to pick up and remember

much more of what is being said. The speaker has little or no need to defend or protect and will, in turn, be more likely to listen.

An effective procedure to use with groups experiencing communication problems is to temporarily require anyone who wishes to speak to summarize what the previous person has said to that person's satisfaction. This seems to create a "mindset" which encompasses the listening suggestions mentioned above. It also reduces the rapid shifts in subject which occur within poorly functioning groups.

SUPPORTING

There is a strong tendency among many people when presented with a new idea to shoot first and ask questions later. We seem to focus first on what's wrong with something and then consider what might be right about it. Focusing on the negative first, as well as a general lack of support for people's ideas, produces a number of effects which reduce team effectiveness. Good ideas go unrecognized. People become frustrated and develop a "what's the use?" attitude. Criticism and cynicism become the "in" thing. A defensive climate is generated wherein individuals become preoccupied only with their own security rather than the growth and survival of the whole group. This often occurs in a boss-subordinate relationship when the boss feels he's supposed to be the "expert," or when someone on a team feels they are the "expert." "We tried that before. . ." "Look, everyone knows that. . ." "Don't waste your time thinking. . ."

Some studies on self-perception have shown that when most people describe themselves, they use eight times more negative descriptions than positive descriptions. Perhaps this helps explain the tendency to focus on negatives; if we perceive ourselves in a negative light, we perceive others and their ideas in a negative light.

Whatever the cause, the effects of lack of support are well documented. The old Hawthorne studies at Western Electric demonstrated production was related to the extent workers perceived management as being concerned for worker well-being. In many businesses, innovative problem solving is directly related to the receptivity of upper management to new ideas. In one large automotive assembly plant, the general foremen and superintendents flatly refused to work on solutions to problems they had identified because they felt 1) their solutions would not be accepted, and, 2) if the ideas for solutions were accepted, they would be responsible if things didn't work out. The plant manager often commented that he didn't want creative people around because all they did was to "screw things up." This kind of attitude produces a "CYA" or Cover Your Ass mentality and climate.

Supporting means the ability to acknowledge the specific merits of others' ideas and to build upon those ideas. For example, "Hey, that really makes sense because. . ." "That's right, and if we did that we could. . ."

The supporting skills require a particular "mindset" and two different supporting actions. The "mind set" is an assumption that other people's ideas have merit even though the ideas may not initially appear to be useful. The first supporting action, *listening*, is the most crucial. The most supportive thing we can do for others is to pay attention to them. Then, having listened to their idea, we can point out at least one specific merit of the idea.

And so, to be supportive, we need to:

- Assume the other person has useful ideas, information, points of view, etc.
- Understanding doesn't mean agreement.
- Mention the specific element which you find useful, and
- Build on these useful elements.

DIFFERING

Some groups run into trouble not because they fail to support one another, but because they over-support. Or an individual or two in the group might have serious reservations about something that's being proposed and not voice concern because he or she feels it would lead to conflict and shatter the group's "togetherness" feelings, or because it might slow the group down. This kind of over-support is often called "group think." The group inadvertently creates so much pressure for commitment that group members are hesitant to disagree with one another.

People often dislike having to differ with others because they don't want to offend the other, cause conflict, or generate a defensive climate. This is unfortunate because differing, if done in the right way, is what leads to both the most rational and creative solutions and produces the strongest groups--those which foster the greatest differences among themselves without it interfering with their respect and regard for one another.

The skill of differing is dependent on the use of the two prior skills--those of *listening* and *supporting*. In other words, if you have carefully listened to another and mentioned what you feel are the specific merits of that person's ideas, that person is going to be far more willing to accept the areas with which you disagree.

Having listened and supported, the next step in *differing* is to phrase your remarks in a way which suggests that it is a concern you have and which does not suggest that the other person, or his ideas, are wrong. For example, after having listened and supported, say, "What concerns me about this. . ." "The problem I'm having is. . ." "What I'm having difficulty with is. . ."

Often differences occur when people are talking about two different things. If you use a formalized problem solving process it is likely that when you do differ, it will be over something specific. For example, a team using

the problem solving process for selecting a course of action may have numerous differences, but they would be related to very specific questions: "How is what you're proposing going to overcome the obstacles we suggested and meet the goal?" "How does your point support what we agreed we were trying to accomplish?"

The difference between differing and arguing is that when we argue, we are saying "I'm right and you're wrong." When we differ, we are both "right" from our respective points of view and we discuss our differences against a common goal or proposed action and examine the merits of both viewpoints.

COMMITMENT

Commitment is a point of maximum agreement so action can follow. Commitment is not achieved by voting, by imposing a win-lose outcome, by dictating the conclusion, or by people's abdicating or giving in. To reach commitment, group members share ideas, discuss and evaluate, debate, organize and prioritize ideas, and struggle to reach the best conclusion together against their common goals. A good test for commitment is to ask the question "Can you support this decision?" If most can support it, the group has achieved 100-percent commitment.

To summarize, effective commitment, i.e., discussion which leads to creative cooperation versus defensive conflict, requires three skills leading to commitment:

- Active listening.
- Supporting.
- Specifying differences in relationship to what we are mutually trying to do together.

If there is good understanding, acceptance and commitment (U/A/C) on the *common goal*, differences in approach become much clearer and easier for the team to decide on what makes sense.

**Adapted from Human Synergistics, 39819
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