



Communication for effective leadership

by Julie Teixeira

Congratulations! You have taken the next step in your career and are now in a leadership position. As a leader, your role comes with a responsibility to effectively communicate to your staff as you guide them forward. You are the person who must drive your team to be successful in developing strategy, implementing plans, and achieving corporate goals.

This is very exciting, but you are now in a position where you must effectively communicate to a group of people who were previously your peers. Or maybe you are new to the organization and you must navigate the unfamiliar surroundings to ensure your staff is engaged and feels that they are being heard. You could also be an

established leader looking to further increase the effectiveness of your team. Whether you are new to a leadership role or a seasoned veteran, how you communicate with your team can be the key to your success or failure. So, what steps can you take to become an exceptional communicator?

Focus on developing great questions

Let's start with taking stock of the questions you are asking when looking for feedback. Ideally, you want to ask open-ended, probing questions that require the person with whom you are communicating to give detailed answers as opposed to providing you with one-word responses. Of course, there are times when

you are looking for a simple yes or no, but you must think about what you are trying to accomplish before you ask your questions. This is important when you are communicating in person, but even more so when communicating via email, where a too-simple response will potentially require multiple back-and-forth messages to clarify.

Take a moment to ask yourself: What do you want to know? Why are you asking the question? How do you need to use the information? Who is your audience? This skill takes forethought and practice to master, but doing so can save you time by letting you collect all the information you need during a single

conversation. Once you have narrowed down exactly what you want to ask, you can tailor the question to effectively gain the information you need.

Let's say you want to determine your team's budget needs for the upcoming year. You know it will be impossible to work every request into the budget, so you need to gather as much information as possible to help guide your decisions as you develop your plan.

Let's try a different approach: "Budget meetings are coming up. Would you please share your funding needs with me as well as the outcome you would expect if we were able to earmark the funds?"

A simple tweak to the question asks both the *what* and the *why*. This saves you from going back and forth to achieve the same end result. It also provides you with the information you need to make a decision because, again, not ev-

us to become more self-aware and ultimately more effective in our communications.

One key to being a good active listener is to look for nonverbal cues and ensure you are not just hearing the words. Body language plays a huge role in effectively listening. Look at the person you are speaking with. Is the person's body language telling you something different than what you are hearing? Noting these nonverbal cues can provide you with the opportunity to ask another question and help engage an upset or nervous employee.

Think about your own body language too. Are you sending signals that you are closed off? Are you showing signs that you are engaged in the discussion by nodding your head or other nonverbal cues? Your employee will likely be more open and engaged when you are engaged and not simply going through the motions.

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You could start by approaching your team with the following: "Budget meetings are coming up. What needs do you have for next year?"

With a simple question, you can expect simple answers. In this question, you asked for the *what*. You didn't ask for the *why*. If you posed this question in a face-to-face discussion, you would have the opportunity to ask for clarification. However, in an email, you will likely have to go back and forth. This can be frustrating for both you and your team. A thoughtful tweak of the same question would allow you to get more information up front.

ery request will be able to make it into next year's budget.

Be an active listener

Now that you have developed a strong question, you can engage in the practice of active listening—a skill that is often overlooked. Frequently, we ask questions with a preconceived notion of our desired answer or expected outcome. In other instances, we ask the question, but we are thinking about what we want to say next. In a leadership position, it is imperative that you make a conscious effort to be engaged in discussions with your team members. Practicing active listening allows

Ask clarifying questions

When clarifying a response, start by expressing your appreciation. This can further the engagement of your team member, and then you can take the opportunity to clarify. For example, you could start by saying, "I really appreciate you sharing your thoughts with me. Earlier, you said *BLANK*, and I was hoping you could elaborate on that topic a bit more for me. Tell me more about how you think



including this request in the 2020 budget can help us meet our department goals.” This shows you were not only listening, but you are interested in learning more of the employee’s opinion on the topic. The person you are speaking with will feel heard and appreciated, and he or she might be more likely to share additional information with you, either now or in the future.

Formulate your response

Another area where you can continually become more self-aware is in how you respond. It is in our nature to quickly react instead of taking the time to think through our replies. Becoming an exceptional communicator

includes practicing your responses and reactions. Following a discussion with a team member, particularly after a difficult conversation, it is imperative to thank the team member for sharing. It is also perfectly fine to let the person know you need time to think things through and will follow up in a timely manner with a response. Taking the time to formulate the right response can take emotions out of the equation and make you a more effective leader.

Where to start

As a leader, it is imperative to become an effective communicator. Doing so takes practice and self-awareness. Pick one area of communicating and work on becoming an expert in that area.

As difficult as it may be, consider asking for feedback on how you are doing—soliciting feedback is yet another skill that can increase the engagement of your team. Once you feel you have mastered one area, move to the next. Over time, you will hone your skills and therefore increase your leadership effectiveness. **NJ**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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