

LEADERSHIP

Rebuild your communications style

By John H. Cox and Anne E. Collier

For years, I thought my communications were just fine. I asked for what I needed, I was clear and concise in my requests—what more could my colleagues and coworkers ask for?

But recently I had the opportunity to see my communications style in a whole new light, thanks to some executive coaching from Anne Collier. Her advice has helped me stop and think about how my colleagues may see things and understand their different needs for communication of information. I’ve revamped how I speak and how I write—and the results have amazed me. Here’s some of what I’ve learned.

| SITUATION | THE OLD WAY | THE NEW WAY | WHAT’S CHANGED? |
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| I need a team member’s help in planning our spring dinner. | “Hi, Elizabeth. I need to see a draft meeting notice for the spring dinner by COB Friday. Is that OK?” | “Hi, Elizabeth. Would you be willing to grab a cup of coffee one afternoon this week so we can talk about the notice for the spring dinner?” | I have a greater awareness that Elizabeth and some other colleagues prefer to receive requests in person and brainstorm solutions. They prefer to take in information by talking rather than reading an email. More importantly, Elizabeth benefits from sorting through her many ideas for handling a project by talking about it. While quick delegation via email may seem to be most effective, it isn’t once you consider the overall needs of the project. |
| Our team has completed a big project. | I assume staff members know that they did a good job. | I am systematic about acknowledging team members and thanking them for a job well done. I take a moment to look at projects from their point of view and consider what they are most proud of. “That graphics layout was so creative—well done!” “That level of detail must have taken you quite some time. I really appreciate your willingness to stick with it.” “You are so fabulous with the members—they love you! I really appreciate your contribution to the team.” | I didn’t need coaching to know that people appreciate being told they did a good job. Rather, coaching helped me see that different personality types like to be acknowledged for what is particularly important to them. A manager that demonstrates appreciation for what matters to his or her team members is more successful at inspiring their best work. |
| A member asks if his company’s strategy is viable. | “No.” | “Frank, let’s first talk about what you’re trying to accomplish here and then focus on solutions.” | I now understand that members aren’t just asking me if a strategy is acceptable. They want me to help them generate a solution that works. |
| My team meets to brainstorm about how to solve a problem. | I am generally frustrated by the group’s seeming inability to come to a decision quickly. | I listen to all ideas, even if they seem ill advised at first blush, and ask questions to encourage more ideas. | I’ve learned that we develop better solutions because we brainstormed as a team. The diversity of views is critical to good decision making. I recognize that coming up with the best solution is more important than deciding on a solution as quickly as possible. |
| Team members come to me with a problem. | I either take over the project and do it myself or quickly explain how to accomplish the goal. | Through discussion, I support my colleagues in generating the solution themselves. | I recognize that my colleagues are very smart and dedicated people. They usually have the answer—they just don’t always know it. If I shortcut the process by giving them “the answers,” I run the risk of offering a less optimal solution to the members as well as depriving my colleagues of the opportunity to grow professionally. |
| I have to give a presentation to my board. | I might use a visual or two to represent figures or a timeline, but overall I’m most comfortable using text and numbers. | I use more charts and graphs to represent project timelines or proposed budgets. | Everyone takes in information differently. Graphics like a pie or bar chart can help others visualize what I’m trying to communicate. This results in better questions, discussion, and understanding. |

John H. Cox discusses the books that have helped him revamp his communications style at www.asacenter.org/associationsnow under the “Now Online” tab.

