

How Does Your Boss Communicate? *Seemingly Transparent Sentences can have a Variety of Meanings*

We all communicate a little differently, and nowhere is this more important than in interactions between bosses and their employees. As employees engage with their boss in everyday activities, it's important to identify the messages behind their speech and behavior. According to executive coach Jennifer Powers, only 7% of any spoken message is conveyed through actual words, 38% is through certain vocal elements, and 55% through nonverbal elements (facial expressions, gestures, posture, etc). This means that if an employee is only relying on verbal communication to interact with their boss – or vice versa – there is probably a lot of miscommunication going on!

REALLY Listen!

Words and deeds matter, of course, but the values that underlie them often mean more. Listening with a keen ear and observing with a sharp eye can make all the difference in actually *understanding*, and not just thinking you understand key points a particular manager is trying to get across.

'My Door is Always Open'

Consider the statement "*My door is always open*," a statement that many bosses say to the employees who report directly to them. Simple, right? In reality, this seemingly transparent sentence can have a variety of meanings. Here are three examples:

Julie

When she says, "My door is always open," Julie means it literally. To foster honesty and

camaraderie, she wants people to feel free to approach her in person at any time. It invigorates her when an employee has an idea and spontaneously pops into her office to share it. When a problem arises, she wants to hear about it immediately because it reassures her that everyone is working as a team. She bristles when people who come in to speak to her close the door behind them. Indeed, she worries that colleagues will see a shut door as evidence of hypocrisy. If Julie must talk with someone in complete privacy, she reserves a meeting room.

Jason

Jason's "open-door policy" is one that he expects people to observe in spirit, but not in absolute terms. The door to his office is open roughly 90% of the time, but when a deadline is imminent, he shuts it so he can concentrate, especially if he is writing. He wants people to see him as easy to approach and "always available," but he views email and team meetings as legitimate ways for people to reach him. If someone considered him a hypocrite for shutting his door once in a while, Jason would think that this person lacked common sense.

Debra

Debra works in a cubicle with low walls, as do her employees, so she doesn't even have a door. To her, an "open door" is merely a metaphor for how colleagues work together. She doesn't want people to fear making mistakes, even in front of her. But she also places a high premium on giving folks the leeway to share novel ideas but expects them to submit them in writing before asking other people to react. To Debra, an open door does not

mean an “instant response,” a phrase that she often uses when describing slipshod work.

As varied as these “open door” interpretations are, at least Julie, Jason, and Debra give their employees something to go on. Some managers don’t even have an explicit policy about how—and how often—to communicate with them.

Three Key Questions

Whatever your manager’s preferred style of communication, an employee will probably need to do a little investigating to figure it out. Again using the examples of Jamie, Josh, and Debra, let’s start by asking these questions:

- ❖ *Is Julie a listener or a reader?* Listeners want to hear information first and read about it later. Readers prefer to see a written report before discussing it with someone.

- ❖ *Does Jason prefer detailed facts and figures or just an overview?* If he thrives on details, focus primarily on accuracy and completeness; if he prefers an overview, emphasize the clarity and crispness of the main idea.

- ❖ *How often does Debra want to receive information?* Your manager may always want to receive updates at specified junctures or she may have different thresholds for each project, such as daily reporting on critical endeavors and periodic updates on secondary tasks.

Tips for Efficiency

Every conversation or other interaction with a manager has implications for productivity. These tips will help any employee to be more efficient:

- ❖ When discussing deadlines, use specific language. Pinpoint a certain date—even a specific hour, if applicable. Avoid vague commitments like “sometime next week,” “ASAP,” or “as soon as we can get to it.”

- ❖ Be honest about what you can and cannot handle. When you commit to an assignment,

clearly identify what resources you need to get the job done.

- ❖ Explicitly identify your objectives each time you communicate with your manager.

- ❖ Ask questions to clarify what you don’t understand. Inquire about opportunities for follow up in case you think of other questions later.

Strengthening a Relationship with a Boss

- ❖ *Put yourself in their shoes.* Figure out the challenges your boss is encountering and be prepared to offer solutions. Anticipate the questions

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that your supervisor may ask about your work or a project and have thoughtful answers or next steps to take. Thinking ahead shows that you’re an invaluable team member. Remember that bosses have a job to do, just like you. There’s a lot about their job that you don’t know about or see, so don’t assume that they’re out to get you. Sometimes they act a certain way for a reason—perhaps *their boss* is putting a lot of pressure on them—so try to be understanding.

- ❖ *Demonstrate value.* They hired you for a reason, so make sure that you’re adding value to the organization and/or position. Bosses want employees not only to agree with them, but also be willing to (tactfully) speak up about the realities and challenges in the business that need



to be addressed. Be a person that speaks with facts, confidence, and reasonable suggestions that produce results. This builds your boss's confidence in you.

❖ ***Do whatever it takes to make your boss look good.*** Everyone cares about their work reputation, or at least they should. If you can make your boss look good, they will be happy – and if they're happy, you'll be happy. This also means that you shouldn't correct your boss in front of others. There is almost nothing worse for a boss than to have a subordinate correct them in front of other people. This is embarrassing for them, even if they are wrong. You're better off mentioning their mistake after people leave.

❖ ***Know how to communicate with your boss.*** This point is particularly crucial for many of us. Does your supervisor like one or two sentence emails or prefer a detailed account of what's going on? Does she want to receive an outline of where your project stands, or do you need to provide all of the details? Learn how your supervisor likes to communicate and receive communication, and then mimic this style.

❖ ***Recognize when to communicate with your boss.*** This is a point that's easy to overlook. You should ask yourself questions like: "What time of day would my boss prefer to answer questions I might have?" and "What day of the week is the best time to approach him?" If your boss is a notoriously slow starter, and you're an early bird, curb your enthusiasm and wait until your boss has had his second cup of Joe before approaching him about a given problem. In terms of a certain day, what if he has an important board meeting on alternating Wednesdays? Then that's probably not a good day to approach him – at least if you can avoid it. If the interruption can't be helped, then say something like, "Josh, I know you have an important meeting tonight, but this can't wait. Do you have a few minutes, or should I come back later?" Sounds simple enough, but knowing something about your boss's schedule in

advance can greatly improve – or sour – an employee-boss relationship.

❖ ***Ask for feedback.*** Don't assume that your work isn't valued because your supervisor is juggling multiple deliverables and not spending as much time with you as you'd like. Too many people shy away from speaking up for fear of the unknown. Ideally your manager should already be providing feedback, but this is your career so don't be afraid to take the driver's seat.

❖ ***Offer to help.*** Demonstrating that you're willing and able to take on more is one of the best ways to position yourself for advancement. And who knows, you might get the opportunity to tackle a project that will let you learn new skills, earn new fans in the organization, and position yourself for bigger and better opportunities.

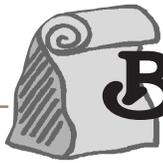
❖ ***Stay above office politics and gossip.*** Your behavior reflects on your manager, so avoid snarky commentary, and when in doubt, be tactful. Whether you think you can trust co-workers or not, it's best to never engage in gossip about your boss, nor anyone else for that matter. Word always gets out when you do, which can weaken your relationship with your boss and peers.

❖ ***Show your boss respect.*** Even if you don't like your boss, respect them. Chances are they've earned their position for a reason. Whether you like it or not, they are your supervisor. They're higher up in the food chain than you and if you disrespect them in any way, this will definitely hurt your relationship.

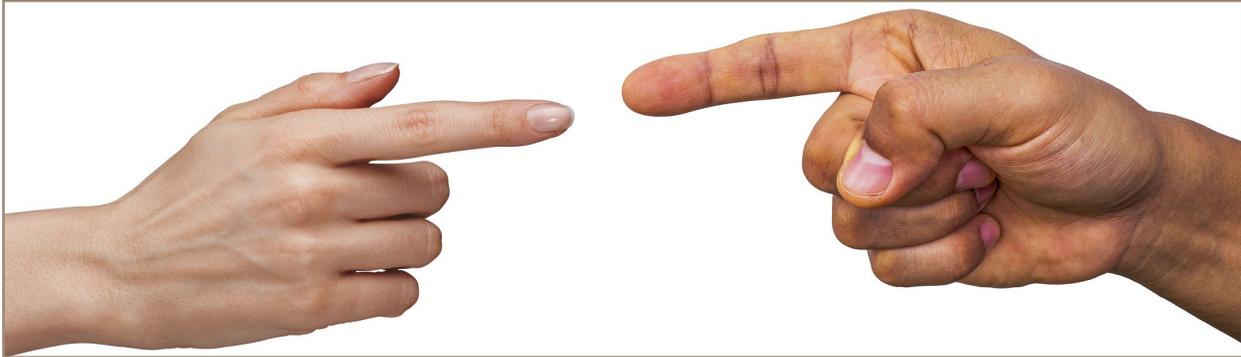
Summary

When it's all said and done, it's about building trust within the relationship between you and your supervisor. Employees need their supervisors to be a mentor, cheerleader, go-to person, and advocate. Instilling trust can make each of these things happen. ■

Sources: Harvard Business Review, "14 Tips for Improving Your Relationship With Your Boss," Jacquelyn Smith, Forbes magazine.



Keeping Conflict to a Minimum



By Patti Fralix

Most people's actions are done with little regard to their impact on others. When one person's behavior is not understood and/or accepted by the other person, conflict ensues. Conflict isn't so bad when it's done without anger, negativity, or hurt feelings, but all too often this isn't the case.

Conflict occurs when people have differences yet do not discuss them openly. There are two types of conflict-resolution styles that are often ineffective: avoiding and ignoring. Avoiding conflict is similar to "hiding one's head in the sand," hoping that the issue will go away or be resolved on its own.

Ignoring, on the other hand, involves making a conscious decision to not deal with the issue, a decision that *can* be negative, or positive. For example, sometimes a decision is the result of choosing to "let this one go" because it just isn't a matter that has to be addressed.

The following are several additional ways that can help prevent and resolve conflicts:

❖ **Make sure there is a common understanding of responsibilities and deadlines.** Too many conflicts occur because managers fail to provide employees with information related to their job responsibilities and the company in general.

Who is accountable for what becomes even more important to clarify in an environment of teamwork and project work. Also, with most

people having so many responsibilities, it's imperative that priorities and deadlines are clear to everyone.

❖ **Commit to conflict management.** Discuss conflict on a general level so that employees understand that change and opportunity always involves conflict. Make sure people understand that managing conflict *effectively* and *constructively* is a company expectation.

Treat employees as adults, and expect them to solve their own problems whenever possible. When an employee complains to a manager about another employee, the manager's first question should be, "*Have you discussed your concern with [name of employee]?*" The manager should be available as a *resource* in helping employees to manage their own conflicts.

Summary

Given increased change, layoffs, and stress, we should expect more workplace conflict. However, understanding different styles of communication, distinguishing positive from negative office politics, and utilizing strategies like these are helpful for managing conflict. When conflict is understood and managed effectively and constructively, results and relationships are improved.

Patti Fralix is the founder of The Fralix Group, a leadership excellence firm; and author of "How to Thrive in Spite of Mess, Stress and Less." ■