



Communicating Successfully with the Boss

One of the more challenging tasks for employees, including team leaders and supervisors, is managing upward. At one time or another it becomes completely necessary and required that direct reports share information with their leader. In our communication programs at Learning Dynamics, we often hear from participants that getting the boss fully up to speed on problems and potential solutions is a requirement that is difficult to fulfill.

Let's do a bit of analysis to discover why so many people find this communication pathway difficult or, at least, worrisome.

If I go into the boss' office to let her or him know about a problem we're having, I feel like I need to choose my words carefully so that I don't give the wrong impression. I feel like successful communication is mostly resting in my message. But when we study effective communication, we discover that success rests much more in the hands of the receiver of the message. Successful message sending is achieved when the sender has a pretty good idea of the processing system of the receiver. The message is clear when the receiver says it is. Its length, speed, tone and body language are "right" when the receiver agrees to accept the receiver role. Accepting that role is completely voluntary and easy to refuse. Any new message goes into a complex combination of other items, emotions, worries, etc. It rises to the top of that complex list when it has the greatest appeal and impact on the receiver.

Remember when you were in class and you asked the teacher, "Is this going to be on the final?" The answer, either way, affected the way you listened

to the material being presented. You managed your decision to be a full receiver or not.

Perhaps the easiest example we have in this regard is how we talk to children. We know the limits of their vocabulary, the speed, volume and tone of the message, and we adjust easily if we need to be understood.

In that scenario we know what will work and what won't, and we adjust our messages accordingly. Let's take a look at the processing system that might describe what was going on in the boss' life before you and your message arrived. She or he is thinking about budget, schedule, employee effectiveness, their own boss and maybe even one higher. Those are the items that matter to the boss.

We know a manager, we'll call Dan, who tells the story of being recently promoted to a managerial position. His new big boss, Keith, had a stellar reputation and history of leadership and effective management. So, we can imagine Dan's surprise when he went into the boss' office and said, "Keith, we have a problem," and Keith said, "Get out," without even looking up from what he was doing. Our manager tried again, only to elicit the same curt directive.

Dan went to a peer who also reported to Keith and told him that Keith threw him out of his office. His peer laughed and said, "I bet you said you had a problem. If you want Keith to listen to you, talk about solutions. Don't focus on the problem but, rather, what you can do about it. At our level we get paid to fix problems, and that needs to be your focus."

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When Dan followed up with the solution approach, Keith stopped what he was doing and sat down with Dan to explore ideas.

Effective managers know that they have to rely on information from their direct reports. Most embrace that requirement enthusiastically. As receivers, they have developed a series of formal and informal channels of information. In fact, most of their job success is determined by information gathered from other people. They need to hear what you have to say, as long as it doesn't waste their time.

So, the challenge for those people who find it difficult to communicate upward is to alter the approach they use to convey their message. Let's imagine that a new supervisor has a team member whose social interactions are rude and confrontational. So, after several unsuccessful attempts to get the employee to tone it down and stop alienating other team members, you have decided to involve HR and you feel obliged to let your boss know.

If you tell him/her that the employee is disruptive, the boss may not care much, especially if you're handling that with HR.

If you tell the boss that the team doesn't like this employee and he isn't a team player, again the boss thinks he/she may stay out of it while you and HR fix it.

If you can tell the boss what the impact of this employee's behavior is on the schedule and there may be a slow down while it is being resolved, now you have a greater share of the boss' attention. She/he asks questions, offers suggestions, wants to problem solve with you to minimize the potential negative outcome. The support you get from your boss is much better because you presented it in a way that is more compatible for your receiver.

So, the real secret to communicating with and managing your boss effectively is not what you say, but in what he/she receives and processes. The more your messages are compatible with that receiver's processing system, the greater the likelihood of being heard and understood.

