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Professional Recruiters

Roger's Tip of the Month

“Effective Communication is a Habit”

One easy way to derail a good military or business career is to ignore the importance of effective communication. In my 36 years of recruiting, I have seen talented people who never live up to their potential because of a lack of skill in this area. I have written of the importance of good communication in my book *PCS To Corporate America* and in forums over the years (see July 1999 Tip: Communicating with a Positive Attitude), but the subject is worthy of looking at from additional points of view.

Can you define effective communication? A lot of people define it as talking so that people understand what you are trying to say. While this is a part of communication, it is only a very small part. I have listened to people who are great at talking, presenting ideas, making sales calls, or answering interview questions, but they are lousy communicators. Why is this? People around you don't buy into your ideas or trust your judgment because you are good at talking. They buy into you because you are good at connecting with them personally and developing mutual respect. This is what I mean by effective communication.

Take a couple of minutes to think about a great communicator you know. They are probably good at putting words into sentences and sentences into dialogue, but effective communication goes beyond this. What makes them great communicators is their ability to use communication to instill trust, generate confidence, and build relationships with others. Communication is a tool they use to effectively influence and collaborate with others.

Improving your communication skills is complicated. First, it is a habit that can be learned and easily un-learned. You can be good at it at one point in your life and by ignoring it or by picking up some bad communication habits, you can quickly become ineffective. The second complication results from the fact that improving effective communication involves a lot more than just yourself. Unlike fixing a habit like poor attention to detail or time management, effective communication involves interaction with others, reading people, saying the right thing at the right time, and connecting with different kinds of people. It takes a lot more dedication and work to improve habits that go beyond yourself.

Here are some things to consider regarding effective communication:

1. Great communicators know how to communicate while disagreeing with another person. I know a lot of leaders who are good at connecting with others as long as they are not working through a disagreement. Invariably, when people disagree with them, they launch into an argument. Practice listening to others in a disagreement. Make them feel good about their contribution. Try to understand their perspective. Once they feel like they are understood, it is much easier for them to listen to you. This will help you communicate constructively in touchy situations.

2. Beware of e-mail. E-mail is good for sharing information, but it is lousy for communicating with people. Don't take the easy way out when communicating with people, especially on issues that are important. I have a rule that I never deliver bad news or try to carry on an important conversation via e-mail. I pick up the phone and make a call.† It takes more time, but it also makes it easier to listen to others, develop understanding, and avoid miscommunication.

3. Don't talk down to people. It has become a status symbol to stay so busy that we rarely make time to talk to others. I see good leaders do this all the time. People walk into their office and they don't even have the courtesy to look them in the eye while talking to them. When you talk with others in a rushed way, whether you like it or not, you communicate that you have more important priorities. When communicating with others, don't try to multitask. Stop what you are doing, look right at them, make them feel important, validate their ideas. When someone walks into my office, I try to concentrate so much on them that I notice their breathing. If you can hear their breathing, you are paying attention to them. Yes, it will take more time, but it goes a long way in communicating with others on a more meaningful level.

4. Give up your own agenda and become a better listener (see June 2000 Tip: The Courage to Listen). If you start every conversation, sales call, or presentation with the goal of covering your own agenda, you are probably not communicating. You win over others by gaining an understanding of their agenda (listening) and not by harping on your agenda. You don't always have to be right and make the best points. Trying to "one-up" others, debate with them, or win arguments is not communicating.

Poor communication habits can derail you in your career, but the biggest danger is that it usually spills over into your personal life. Most of us are not good enough to act one way during the day at work and flip a switch in our personal lives (kids, spouses, friends, family, etc.). There are many incentives to re-double your efforts to master effective communication.

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