The Multigenerational Workforce Communication Conundrum

As a corporate trainer, one of my most common training topics is communications. Indeed, effective communications skills are literally the lubricant that moves virtually all organizations forward. Unfortunately, with the ridiculously rapid advances in technology over the past few years, simple communications have become not so simple. When I was married just five years ago if I had something important to tell my husband, I'd most likely pick up the phone and tell him. Just the other day I sent him a text message with some important news and became increasingly agitated as I waited and waited for his return text only to receive a completely insufficient response "k". To this I immediately picked up the phone (displeased by his lack of enthusiasm at my great news) and complained vehemently only to be embarrassed when he explained, *"Dana, it's great news, but I'm driving on 285 and just couldn't type!"* This type of miscommunication has become all too commonplace.

Recently, I was facilitating a team retreat and we'd just finished a communications activity and we were discussing it. As I'd hoped, this led quickly to a broader discussion of communication challenges and issues within this particular team. One older woman began to speak openly about how she perceived there to be problems within the group with communications – ending her comments with an emphatic *"We need to stop emailing and pick up the %^$# phone!"* I was so glad to hear her candor a bit surprised honestly at her level of frustration…then I was completely floored when I noticed that as she continued to speak, her voice began to crack and she seemed to become quite emotional, finally simply stopping and allowing someone else to speak. As others began to chime in, I thought to myself, *this is really deep.* It's not just about the fact that younger generations may prefer text and email while older generations sometimes lean more heavily on face to face or phone communications (although differences in preferred mode are HUGE) – what I really began to understand in that moment is that these differences can really have a subsequent unintended impact on trust levels and morale within the organization. I later learned that she perceived email responses to her phone calls (that she often received from her younger colleagues) to be a huge sign of disrespect, and I can only imagine that these misperceptions have inhibited her ability to bond with these colleagues of a different generation.

The complexities of communications have become much more pronounced in the workplace particularly since today's workplace arguably includes four (soon to be five) different generations – Veterans (born before 1946) Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1979), Generation Y/Millenials (1980-2000) – comingling not so well in many cases. I think that most of us readily understand why we couldn't cohabitate with our parents or children without a constant Prozac drip, but somehow we expect that work teams and organizations with heterogeneous mixes of ages, generations, backgrounds, and life experiences will not only coexist but team effectively by force of natural osmosis. Arguably, one of the areas of organizational dynamics that stresses the multigenerational workforce most is indeed communications. Anyone with children and parents knows that communications within each generation can differ drastically. These differences can be separated into primary types: the mode (how we communicate) and the message (what we say).

The Mode

Potential Differences and Dangers

This may be one of the most obvious communication distinctions among generations. Clearly, Millenials (and Gen Xers to a lesser extent) have grown up in a much different technological world than their more senior workplace counterparts. With technology continuing to change at lightning speed, these differences will likely only become more pronounced in coming years. One of the biggest problems in the workplace today is that most people simply default to their preferred mode of communication for most communications. Unfortunately, this approach (while convenient for the "sender") can create significant frustration for the "receiver(s). We all know people that you can email for days and will only get a response when you pick up the phone and call them (or vice versa). The simple fact is that when employees are constantly communicated to in their least preferred mode, they not only become frustrated but may also misinterpret the sender's intent and/or content. The Mehrabian Studies show that 93% of a message comes from the non verbals (not the words) so those who rely almost exclusively on email/text/IM may be taking huge risks with potential misinterpretation of their message (even taking offense with the impersonal delivery method) while those who rely instead on face to face and phone may similarly run a risk – in this case of not being efficient.

Suggestions-

❖ Discuss the issue and develop ground rules for the organization. There is no "right answer" for all situations; instead the key is to discuss what works best in your organization given your industry, clientele, corporate culture, etc. and document these ground rules for all.

❖ As a group, avoid potential miscommunications via email/text/IM, by establishing email guidelines like "avoid ALL CAPS and !!!!)

❖ Acknowledge the Business Communications Hierarchy (see Exhibit 1) and establish general guidelines for when to use each mode.

❖ Ask all managers to have their employees share their individual preferred mode of communications. Then, for individual interactions encourage "customized communications" where the sender attempts to use the receiver's preferred communication mode instead of defaulting to their preferred mode.

❖ Offer training for employees who may not be as familiar with the latest technology (IM, Wikis, social media, Sharepoint,, Evite, electronic sign up applications, etc.) and may be being "left behind" or separated from counterparts actively communicating using these tools.

The Message

Potential Differences and Dangers-

Clearly, with different generations there will be differences in level of formality, style of communicating, and even adherence to grammatical rules. In some instances older workers have been accustomed to communicating (particularly to senior management) with much more formality, and they may equate this formality in communication with respect. When they're not communicated with with the same formality, they may misinterpret this as a lack of respect. On the

other end of the spectrum, Millenials and even Gen Xers may be much less formal in style – maybe using first names, emoticons, colloquial language, and more casual templates for written communications.

Although grammar rules may not have changed, the level of importance we attribute to them certainly has shifted over time. During my college internships, I distinctly remember having a grammar textbook in my cubicle so that I could quickly check grammar rules as I typed "memos". I knew that using flawless grammar was expected in a professional environment. Years later as a full time professional, I set up my email application to automatically spell/grammar check outgoing messages when I hit send (assuming this was "good enough"). In recent years, I've received many emails where the sender simply includes the "grammar apology" as I call it – *Please excuse any typos in this message as it's being sent from a mobile device.* The question of whether adherence to grammar rules still matters is an ongoing debate and one that certainly highlights differences in the generations. I've often noticed that a typo may be considered completely acceptable by some and obliterate the sender's credibility with others. In my training classes I suggest erring on the side of always adhering to grammatical rules for that very reason. The difference in how different generations may interpret a typo, sentence fragment, incorrect use of punctuation, etc. can often be stark.

Suggestions-

❖ Don't underestimate the importance of relationship building. With wide ranges in backgrounds and demographics teams often (albeit unintentionally) develop cliques and don't actively encourage employees from different generations to get to know each other and build strong relationships. Within the context of strong relationships, miscommunications are less common and even when they do happen tend to be less likely attributed to malicious intent.

❖ Encourage employees to discuss differences. The temptation is to avoid discussing generational differences but bringing them out in the open not only provides opportunities to learn from each other and actively develop group norms but it also helps employees better understand each other – the key to relationship building.

❖ If there are basic expectations within the organization, make them known. Discuss the corporate culture. If it's not acceptable for employees to email clients with bullet listed content and instead formal memos on company letterhead are preferred, make that known and explain why it's important.

While it's critically important to be aware of multigenerational differences, one should also avoid the temptation to automatically stereotype an employee based on their age (or other characteristic for that matter). Clearly, individuals are just that and may not reflect the typical characteristics of their particular generational group. (For example, there are many older employees who embrace technology in their communications and younger workers who eschew it.) Likewise, one must recognize that many other factors also impact communication differences like industry, corporate culture, gender differences, etc. Indeed, organizational communications is a complex organism – one that cannot be perfected, only improved. One key to such continuous improvement is not only understanding but embracing generational differences. The good news is that qualities of each generation can be beneficial for the larger organization. As such there are distinct opportunities to learn from one another and synergize…but first we must trust each other enough to open the lines of communication.

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