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Getting the message across

By Diane Stafford

I told him what I wanted, but he didn't hear a thing I said.

I left three phone messages but haven't heard back. I don't know what they want.

Every time I try to talk to him, he acts like he has to run somewhere else.

Any of those comments sound familiar?

To quote from "Cool Hand Luke": "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

It takes effective communication to make business run smoothly, but sometimes the message doesn't get through. Whether you're a boss managing a crew, a business owner trying to reach a client, or someone trying to talk to a supervisor, there's a good chance you've hit communication barriers.

We're not talking about language barriers. We're talking about everyday relationships that have static on their communication lines.

There are two parts to any communication: The message sent, and the message received. The sender needs to be clear and direct. The recipient needs to listen. Ideally, the exchange ends when there's mutual understanding.

But this is the real world. People are busy. It's hard to take time to hash out every directive or announcement. But, when the "I told him what I want but he didn't hear a thing I said" scenario drives you nuts it's time for a meeting of the minds.

If what seems to you like clear directions aren't being followed, ask your worker in for a chat. Say something like this: "I feel like you're sometimes

not hearing what I'm saying. For example, when I asked you to (insert the specific, recent failure-to-communicate incident here), that didn't happen. Can you help me understand why we weren't communicating?"

Putting the message in terms of "I feel" or "I need you to" instead of starting out with a "You blew it" tirade can work wonders. Ask the employee to ask you questions if he doesn't understand something. Ask him to tell you if he has personal issues that get in the way of carrying out your directions. Then listen. Communication is a two-way street. Once you hear his side, it's easier to know whether disciplinary steps are the right thing to do.

What about the "I left three phone messages but haven't heard back" situation?

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Try another means of communication. Most people have preferred communication styles. Some would rather talk on the phone. Others find it easier to respond to an email. Still others won't move off the dime without good old face-to-face contact.

Let's say you've just laid sod, hash mark to hash mark, on the middle of the high school football field when you read in the newspaper that the "Tiny Tot Cheerleaders" are scheduled to hold a

camp this weekend on your field. Your work was scheduled in advance. How could the mix-up have happened?

Your district site manager is on vacation. Your voice mail message to the high school cheerleader sponsor hasn't been returned. Don't assume she's ignoring you. Try another communication medium, like email, and reframe your message, perhaps in another voice mail as well. Explain in detail the reason why the camp can't be held on the field. Say

that it's time for solutions, not blame, and offer to help locate an alternative field. Empathizing with the sponsor who's preparing for an onslaught of a hundred 4- to 8-year olds may help her empathize with you and ease what could potentially be an explosive encounter.

And then there's the "Every time I try to talk to him, he acts like he has to run somewhere else" syndrome.

Some people have a bad habit: They don't devote their attention to someone who's speaking to them. Listening is a conscious discipline that some people haven't mastered. Others pull rank and don't give subordinates the same attention they'd give their superiors. It's rude, but what can you do about it?

Here's a technique that may bridge the communication gap when you're trying to talk to someone who's clearly distracted: "Joe, it looks like you're busy with something else. When would be a good time for me to talk to you?"

That approach lets Joe know that he's not paying attention. It puts the ball in his court to say when he'll be ready to listen. Some people will apologize and devote full attention. Others will agree it's not a good time and tell you when it will be.

It's no secret that there are hidden agendas behind some orders. Some seemingly simple declarations have double meanings. What we hear often depends on the background and the context into which we insert them. Also, the words others hear aren't always as clear to them as we think they were when we said them.

Clear communication requires effort. When the effort takes more energy than it's worth, it's time to reassess the work relationship. Sometimes, as Donald Trump showed us, the clearest message is, "You're fired." That may be the end solution for some employees. But for people you can't fire, the only solution sometimes is finding the time to invest in a different way of communicating.

[Editor's note: This is the first in a series of six articles in the new Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing Irrigation have partnered in this series to bring professional development and career issues to the forefront.] ■

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