

Communication is Key

4 Actionable Tactics to Accelerate Career Success

BY VIVIAN CIAMPI

Globalization, technology, rampant regulation and fierce competition at every turn have made today's workplace more complicated than ever. This is causing professionals at all levels – from the mailroom to the boardroom – to flounder as they attempt to navigate the escalating complexities, consistently perform at a high level and achieve upward career mobility.

Because modern workplace dynamics have become so complex, leaders have less time than ever to spend coaching and mentoring employees, and to benefit from such guidance for their own professional gain. In addition, universities systematically churn out graduates who have learned black and white technical skills and theoretical concepts, but not how to aptly prepare for, and traverse through, the inevitable "Gray Area" of a company – the environment and culture that manifests from the multi-faceted challenges and forces an organization faces. The result is a glut of entry-level and entrenched professionals who are unprepared, unequipped and unable to effectively communicate in a way that will productively impact their career.

While an intangible, the Gray Area is a very real phenomenon driven by human nature, internal and external politics, industry guidelines, company protocols and market pressures, among other factors. The importance of learning how to effectively communicate within this ambiguous environment cannot be understated. Too many in our nation's workforce, both employees and executives, are ill-equipped to engage with an audience – any audience – with ease and intention, which is keeping them from realizing their full potential and attain a maximum measure of success.

With this in mind, here are four tactical tips to help professionals at every level become a more effective communicator and, in doing so, gain better control of their career trajectory:

1 Become the "Universal Translator."

The most valued and successful person

in any business is the one that can translate facts, figures and concepts into actionable ideas that will not only make sense and resonate with their direct network, but also with any and all constituents those ideas will be presented to. This includes superiors, subordinates, peers, customers, prospects, business partners and vendors.

What to Do: Step out of your comfort zone or discipline; let go of any insider department lingo or technical terms and focus on the audience at hand; suggest specific ways others can move forward with the information relative to what is important to them; and present the vision, plan or theory in a way that is clear, crisp, confident and above all, actionable. This person is successful because of their ability to translate complex or technical concepts into strategic steps that will impact the bottom line. If others can understand, relate to and rally around what you are presenting, it is sure to yield winning results.

2 Meet before you meet.

There are few things more painful and embarrassing than getting completely derailed in a meeting. Many have seen it – someone showing up with well-prepared and rehearsed slides only to get completely pummeled with questions from every discipline in the room before they even get beyond the intro page. Instead of moving forward with their agenda, they are sent 10 paces back and five paces to the side, only to leave the meeting with more work, lost credibility, a confused and frustrated audience and, above all, no progress on the agenda at hand. If you've ever experienced this personally or seen it happen to another, you know it is hard to recover.

What to Do: Determine who your key constituents are relative to your topic ahead of time; set up one-on-one meetings with all of them at least a few days in advance of the big meeting; socialize the topic with each of the constituents individually; and make sure you understand their perspective and answer any questions or concerns that

they have ahead of time. By taking these steps, you will undoubtedly gain valuable information that will not only help you refine your presentation, but also be poised and prepared to actually present in the real meeting.

Socializing the idea ahead of time may feel like extra work, but the benefits far outweigh the additional time – and the very real risks of not doing so. This strategy will facilitate your ability to effectively cover a lot of ground and actually garner decisions in the meeting without playing catch-up or spending valuable time trying to get everyone on the same page. Effective communication, speed and alignment are a few of the key advantages here.

3 Stop, ask and listen!

Today's fast-paced workplace has most of us running at record speed, often in circles like we're on a hamster wheel. We are putting out fires and have more in our email inbox than our outbox each and every day. The resulting pressure of this overload causes us to rush through conversations so we can cross it off our proverbial "to do list" and move on to the next triaged task. Unfortunately, plowing through important conversations will never yield a productive outcome, but often produces more work and head-aches.

What to Do: Stop and take a breath so you don't rush into your agenda in the first five minutes of the conversation; ask open ended questions, such as "What's going on in your department?" or "How has this system helped you?" Once the person you're engaged with has the opportunity to respond, make 200 percent sure you are actively listening – not just hearing them – and that you give them ample time to convey their thoughts without your interjection, direction or interruption.

The majority of the time, you will gain key insights from these conversations and will be able to craft a more informed response – one that better resonates with the person(s) you're speaking with. Even if you already know the answer or have a brilliant retort, slowing down and letting others speak first, in full, allows them to "empty their cup" which puts them in a better position to have it filled back up with what you have to say in response.

When you do finally have the chance to speak, keep in mind people only have the

capacity to absorb so much. If we provide an overload of verbose detail, you risk overflowing the listener's "cup" and may ultimately lose the real essence of what you are trying to convey. Stay focused on who your audience is and what they care about to ensure that your dialogue and key points are streamlined and succinct.

This tactic also helps build more productive, trusting professional relationships. The most successful people in any company aren't necessarily the smartest, but rather those who take the time to listen and learn from others because they truly value what they have to say. Adhering to this strategy will not only make you a much more effective communicator, but it will also garner tremendous goodwill throughout the organization as you start to hone a discipline of talking less and listening more.

4 Converse with clarity.

People today are inundated with data, work under tight timeframes, and talk in acronyms. Some technical people and other professionals tend to use a lot of insider jargon and industry terminology when they communicate, making it difficult for anyone outside their immediate network to understand. Also, incompetent people tend to rush through important details hoping no one else will ask questions or notice their inaptitude, and you certainly don't want to be perceived in this light. Such conversation crushers can leave others feeling intimidated, out of the loop and unable to effectively contribute.

What to Do: Rather than contributing poorly to the conversation or sitting on the sidelines as the dialogue ensues, a better approach is to pick the right setting and ask

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