

Concerned with Face-Saving or Problem-Solving? *Communication Cues and Clues*

By Dianna Booher

Delayed on a recent trip and sitting in an airline club for a few hours, I overheard this conversation between three thirty-something travelers. Amy, Jeanne, and Bill all arrived at the club together, piled their luggage in the chairs across from me, and began to unpack their laptops.

Bill offers to go out to buy hamburgers for all three. While he's gone, Amy and Jeanne discuss a customer presentation they've evidently just delivered in Chicago. Amy says to Jeanne, "I hate it when he critiques my presentations. He does that all the time. My slides. The structure. I don't think he's all that good himself. I thought I did fine today."

"Yeah, you did great," Jeanne responds.

Amy leaves to go get a cup of coffee and find a place to charge her cell phone. Bill returns with the hamburgers and joins Jeanne. They unwrap their burgers and start eating. Bill gets interrupted immediately by a cell phone call. When he finishes the conversation, Jeanne asks, "Was that about the job? Have you decided who's going to get the promotion?"

"Yeah. Steve. I'm going to announce it on Monday. He did a fabulous job today in the meeting. We're sure to win that contract."

"Amy doesn't like it when you critique her on her presentations," Jeanne says. "She's intimidated."

"That's too bad. She could be so much better—if she got some help with those skills."

Jeanne nodded agreement and their conversation moved on to other topics before Amy rejoined them.

Two things struck me about that snippet of overheard conversation. 1) Jeanne told Amy what she wanted to hear—"You did great." 2) Amy had likely missed a promotion because she routinely rejected feedback from her boss.

Emotional maturity and openness to direct communication without defensiveness are two traits that are in high demand—but in short supply. Feedback feels uncomfortable to many people. As long as face-saving remains the goal and culture, people will face a dilemma: Shall we be silent and save the relationship? Or communicate honestly and solve the problem?

It's become standard operating procedure at the office—people say what they think others want to hear. And when someone breaks the mold and speaks candidly,

relationships ripple and projects grind to a halt until someone repairs the damage. That vicious cycle keeps many organizations locked into mediocrity, and many people stalled in a dead-end job.

Consider the following communication strategies as a way out of such a downward spiral and a means to improving your next workplace discussion.

Give Under-Performers the Straight Story

Allowing under-performers to remain on the payroll is a form of dishonesty that harms the entire organization. Continuing to pat them on the back and grant them raises does not square with their own reality. They know their work does not meet standards and does not match what their colleagues do. If you don't tell the truth about how they perform, how can they trust you to tell them the truth about other things?

Employees know who isn't pulling their own weight. When they're all treated the same and receive the same feedback despite the refrain, "we reward people based on performance," they discount other promises as well. Trust dips even lower.

In short, deal honestly with emotionally immature, defensive employees.

Offer Great Performers Their Props

Some leaders fear complimenting their star performers. They figure if they tell these stars how well they're doing, they may develop their talents and move on.

What's worse? That they grow and leave—or become discouraged and leave? Without encouragement, the valued employees may feel that you don't care about them and leave to go where somebody cares more or will encourage them. Great performers need honest feedback as much as the under-performers.

Own Up to Your Mistakes When You Miss Your Cues

A business development manager for a large oil company reported at the beginning of the year that he was about to close a large gas contract with a net profit of millions of dollars. When the deal fell into jeopardy, he couldn't bring himself to tell his colleagues that he had overstated the certainty of the deal. At the end of each quarter, he presented trumped-up, vague explanations about why the contract still remained unsigned—yet kept insisting that the deal would close "shortly." All budgets had been based on his projections. And when the deal did not happen, the loss of projected revenues created tidal waves throughout the entire organization.

When people have to admit their own mistakes, admissions often follow along these lines:

- "I was wrong, but so was everybody else."
- "What did you expect—under the circumstances?"
- "Well, I'm not at liberty to tell you all the behind-the-scenes things that happened, but we're fortunate things didn't turn out worse."

The message: Mumbo-jumbo meant to excuse the speaker's mistakes or failures. The attempt at face-saving rather than admission of error rarely works in the long run. Silent message: Self-protection at the expense of credibility.

Purposefully unclear communication—with bad intentions or the best of intentions—can be devastating for both individuals and organizations. In such cultures, everyone gets along, goes along—and sinks together. Open communication and emotional maturity, rather than defensiveness, foster trust and excellence. Say it—with grace and sensitivity, yes. But say it directly, firmly, clearly.

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900 Words

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