

# Does Your Communication Style Handicap Your Team?

By Dianna Booher

We live, work, love, and socialize in a climate where people don't say what they mean—even with the best of intentions. The following conversation unfolded between two managers in a seminar I was leading.

“I can't put off the decision any longer—I have to give the president an answer tomorrow about taking over the operations in Germany.”

“Why would you turn it down? It'd be a great experience for your kids. Only two years there. Then you'd come back here and have any job you wanted for the next twenty years.”

“It'd be great if it were just my wife and me. But I'd have to move our two youngest kids, my mother-in-law, and our granddaughter.”

“The company wants you there, right? Did they give you a choice?”

“I think so—I mean, I *think* I have a choice. I guess that's what I'll try to determine in the meeting tomorrow with the president. He did *ask* me if I wanted the job.”

“They don't *ask*. If you don't take this assignment, it'll be your last shot at the executive suite.”

The manager with the pending meeting pondered his predicament: What had the president meant? Take it or leave it? Or, take it and love it?

Sometimes people keep their conversations purposely vague to avoid conflict or hurt feelings. If someone asks, “Hey, how do you like my new office?” you're not likely to say, “If I had to look at this color paint all day, it'd make me puke.”

Families are no different. They often value polite conversation during a holiday weekend over direct discussion of serious issues. Some couples land in divorce court because neither can discuss straightforward feelings for fear of defensiveness from their spouse. The longing for harmony outweighs the importance of honesty.

To some extent, tact and evasion make civilization and camaraderie possible. But purposeful evasion as a rule, over time—where harmony is valued above honest communication—destroys trust, erodes morale, and lowers productivity in the workplace.

## **Six Communication Styles That Create Either Paranoia or Productivity**

Leaders typically fall into one of six patterns of communicating, and that pattern largely contributes to the communication climate of the whole team. Some styles are far more effective than others.

***Give and Let Live.*** Leaders who use this style send out lots of information in all directions to everybody in the organization—regardless of whether it’s tailored, relevant, or applicable to others’ interests or needs. Their mindset: I’ve done my job in sending the information—let them figure out if they want to know what it all means.

***Sell and Compel.*** Leaders who use this approach identify a few key themes, sell their point of view, and compel others to see the wisdom of their strategies and buy in to their goals.

***Align and Redefine.*** These leaders listen for misunderstandings, continue to correct those who get “out of line,” and redefine their goals. They rally the troops and ask them to “align” around those few core issues.

***Reply and Deny.*** For the most part, these leaders play hide and seek and are seldom seen by rank-and-file employees and customers. They listen to the grapevine for questions, concerns, or complaints and then either reply and either confirm or deny rumors.

***Control and Scold.*** Leaders who use this approach withhold information in an attempt to control what happens. They scold employees, suppliers, and strategic partners, causing them to behave like dysfunctional family members. People pout, become jealous, backstab, become territorial, lie, tattle, play favorites, argue, withdraw, and generally work against each other.

***Share and Compare.*** Leaders with this mindset communicate information and their conclusions drawn about that information: their vision, goals, strategies, and initiatives. They ask for and listen to input from others about before setting all decisions, policies, and plans in stone. Then they keep their ears to the ground for necessary course corrections as new information, better ideas, and varied viewpoints surface. They make us much effort to hear as to be heard, and they encourage other people to talk to each other about best practices.

Any one of the first five styles may limit a leader’s effectiveness and people’s productivity. Take a culture that values harmony above all else, ... stir in an ineffective communication style of leaders, ... and you have a recipe for dysfunction, desperation, and duplicity. By contrast, direct communication embraces rather than evades the truth, involves clear words, and focuses on the facts. That kind of communication increases productivity while eliminating the paranoia that vexes and perplexes many people.

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