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Lisa Kianor • NOV. 01, 2009

From the Nov. 2009 Issue

A silver lining from the economic downturn has been the return of some focus on customer service and loyalty. All consumers today — individuals and businesses — scrutinize their choices more closely to ensure they get value, be it dinner out, a new electronic device or professional services. The survivors and the winners are those who can showcase what separates them. In these times, better communication can be a big differentiator.

John, a project manager for a business consulting firm, found that out after he spent a week out of town at a management leadership workshop. He was having some challenges with customer satisfaction, although most often the work done was very good. The workshop covered many of the business situations John had experienced and recommended using different communication tools and techniques to help change the outcome. John committed to try them out as soon as he got back to the office. We're joining him on his first week back to see how what he's learned has changed some of his habits.

THE “NEED TO REMEMBER MY POINT” CHALLENGE:

The last time John met with consultants on a new project, he had been so focused on a point he had to make that he didn't hear when everyone agreed to do their client check-in meeting by phone. John had been trying to encourage more face-to-face meetings and had totally missed this — a real loss for the company. John is now determined to use a workshop tip: The simple discipline of writing down a few words as a reminder frees you back up to be totally engrossed in the conversation at hand and not distracted trying to remember something.

THE “WAS MY E-MAIL READ THE WAY I MEANT IT?” CHALLENGE:

As he rushed out of town for his workshop, John sent off a quick e-mail to his

assistant, Brad. “Can’t wait to fix what we are doing wrong!!”

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- “Let’s Get Real or Let’s Not Play” by Mahan Khalsa
- “Our Iceberg is Melting” by John Kotter
- “The Art of Speed Reading People” by Paul Tieger

CHALLENGE:

John and his team had recognized that one of their client’s team members, George, was not catching on to the training and slowing progress enough to cause delays. George was well liked, so everyone was uncomfortable to say what needed

to be said. John had specifically asked about this at the workshop since he saw firsthand where situations like this often end badly. Early intervention may be painful in the short term, but it’s usually right for the long term.

Upon his return, John asked for a private meeting with the client for a project update. He reviewed the positives and complimented the team, then said there was one team member challenge — trying to get George up to speed. He asked the company president for some ideas and came away with some insights that helped get George over the hump. The technique: open communication.

THE “TIME EXPECTATION” CHALLENGE:

John always has kick-off meetings at the start of every job. This last one was small, creating a new vendor analysis report. John and the client had agreed on the layout and investment, so when the client had to reschedule the meeting he suggested they had what they needed and would get going. Ten days later, the client called John asking for the report. John thought he had two more weeks, but that got lost in the lack of communication. John has since revised his templates so that proposals clarify time frames.

THE “I NEED TO ASK MORE QUESTIONS, WHY DON’T I?” CHALLENGE:

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Never again. John’s takeaway from his workshop was the need to get comfortable enough to ask all the questions you need to know. Now John asks several questions as he wraps up each meeting: Assignments? Time frames? Responsibilities? Another plus: With better explained roles, the projects go smoother.

THE “CAN I TAKE CRITICISM?” CHALLENGE:

The final skill John wanted to bring back from his workshop was to help his team develop the communication art of taking criticism. A culture that learns this gains an advantage. It is said that a complaint is a gift since you get a chance to improve, versus not knowing and losing a client. To make people feel comfortable giving you negative feedback and/or constructive criticism, you must set your ego aside and be committed to listening.

Never try to justify your actions when someone is sharing this information. Take it all in, make sure you hear what they say, and validate their feelings: “I can see how you might feel this way; I understand now how you perceived the situation.” You can do this without agreeing.

You then want to really evaluate the information. If you change a process based in part on this feedback or do something differently, be sure to go back to thank the client and tell them the change you have made as a result. This shows better than anything else that you really are listening.

These situations are not unique to John; you likely recognize one or two yourself. If so, remember what John learned about communication techniques. In our new world, social media and 140-character tweets exemplify how a lot of “communication” takes place — fast and in short spurts with acronyms.

The true “art” of communication becomes more and more vital at

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