

Troubles with Workplace Communication

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Communicating in the workplace is essential of course and it can take many forms. For our purposes, we can put aside directives from above and communications within a well-oiled team that has been working together for a common purpose like a surgical team or the military in a live conflict zone. Workplace communications are affected by the same issues affecting us in society at large and they have the same instrumental purposes; for example, to share information and learn something new, to convince another of one's point of view or to resolve a problem/issue collaboratively.

Aside from the personal issues that people experience in a lifetime, effective communications are undermined today by a backdrop of conditions that set the tone for all social relationships. Our "information" tells us that troubles are brewing. The war in the Ukraine, climate change, financial insecurities, health uncertainties, internal and violent conflicts in several countries - including Canada - will likely be joined by what tomorrow's news may bring. We see the increase of polarization on almost any issue as conventional and social media pump out reams of information that are hard for anyone to follow. Humans have a need to feel informed and unfortunately, they can be preoccupied with confirming their biases as they filter out what they consider extraneous information. It is now common for people to carry a sense of malaise about what they know or don't know - or fear. In a large or complex organization those societal factors can be joined by

poor procedures that confuse communication channels and the workplace can also experience the pervasive impact of an employees who enjoys encouraging confusion and strife among colleagues and superiors to advance a personal agenda.

In addition to this backdrop of factors there are several phenomena that can work against communications and three of these factors merit further and closer examination.

The first is that people are vulnerable to believing the wrong things. Michael Shermer in his [Conspiracy: Why the Rational Believe the Irrational](#) indicates that this is not a reflection of mental or emotional intelligence, but the result of our need to cooperate and collaborate. No one person can know or understand everything. The world is a complex place and people have to rely on "experts" to address the complex issues. We can all turn on a light, but most of us don't know where the electricity comes from, how alternating currents are transmitted and channeled into our offices, under the control of the little plastic switch on the wall. We leave that to the engineers, the linesmen/women, the electricians and the manufacturers to make it all happen.

As we accept the huge information gaps, enter the information that is misleading by design or error, and as a consequence we are left with a playing field that is ripe for misinformation that people adopt to address the questions that come up from time to time. Given the blizzard of information available to us, the dumb and the brilliant can fall prey to the wrong opinions or beliefs.

The second impediment to effective communication is the difference between opinions and beliefs. With the development of medical technology like MRIs, the fields of psychology and neuroscience are increasing their focus on this difference, because neurological reactions can be measured to an extent never seen before.

An opinion is a judgement based on an honest attempt to draw a reasonable conclusion from factual evidence. It is potentially changeable - depending on how the evidence is interpreted. By themselves, opinions have little power to convince unless they are supported by evidence and how that evidence is received. Unlike an opinion, a belief is a conviction based on cultural or personal faith, morality, or values and not on facts or other evidence. They cannot be disproved or even contested by reason or logic.

Neuroscience is now looking at the effects of beliefs on the brain, that dynamic mass of fatty tissue that processes and stores almost all of our bodily functions. This might explain why, during my years in practice of discussing, learning, negotiating, convincing and teaching, I occasionally realized that I am engaged with someone who is defending a belief. This always causes me to step back to reset the discussion in a different approach that is now facing a much greater challenge. Without this realization, the communications will fail both parties and even with this realization the discussion may be doomed to fail. People die for beliefs, but very few will throw themselves on a sword for an opinion.

A third speed bump on the way to a conversation's effectiveness is the Strawman Argument. This happens when an opposite party hijacks a conversation with a topic of his/her own to side-track the discussion with an irrelevant issue to win the discussion. While one offers evidence of the need to stockpile supplies and equipment, the other can counter with, "But you can't increase the company's carbon footprint with more demands on the supply chain's fossil fuel emissions". While greenhouse emissions are a real issue, it very likely has no relevance to the issues at hand, particularly if there are no carbon taxes or cap and trade systems. In the meantime, discussion gets blurred, polarization between the two (2) parties, based on two (2) different issues, may ensue and effective communication fails.

Dealing with these impediments and the backdrop of today's malaise could be the subject of much, much

more discussion. Awareness, however, can be a step in the right direction.