

Communication: The Elusive Challenge of Getting the Message

Have you ever wondered how it is that a group of your colleagues can attend the same meeting, be given the same information and each come away with vastly a different message? Part of the challenge is the filters through which we all take in data. Equally important is differing learning styles.

Filters

According to Warren Bennis¹ three filters dominate how we take in information. These filters impact what information we take in and when we acknowledge or internalize the information.

The first is the social filter. This refers to the situation where we reject information because we do not have regard for its source. In some law firms I hear about “the inner circle”: the inner circle is respected by the leader and their opinions are valued. What happens to important information that comes to the leader from someone outside the inner circle?



by Karen MacKay, MBA, CHRP
President

Does it get filtered, devalued and overlooked by the leader? If indeed the social filter is a natural process the challenge to leaders is to push themselves to be more open to information no matter the source.

One of the many challenges of membership in a law firm is *followership*. Followers equally use social filters when considering the messages being shared by leaders. If lawyers in the firm do not respect the leader, they simply filter out the message, refuse to change behaviour and disregard the initiatives and ideas espoused by the leadership.

The second is the *contextual filter*. This filter causes someone in a position of influence or power to “reject the significance of the surroundings”. Consider the situation of a lateral partner who is brought in to build or lead a practice group. Consider that this lateral partner has come from a very different firm and has experienced a very different culture. Such situations are destined to fail if the new leader disrespects and disregards the new firm’s history and culture. The lateral may have a vision that just doesn’t fit and a style that is flatly rejected by his or her new partners. The best of intentions may be lost by someone who lacks sensitivity and who is not politically savvy enough to execute her plans appropriately within the context of the new firm.

The third filter is that of *self knowledge*. According to Bennis,

“lack of self-knowledge is the most common source of leadership failure.”

If this is the case in the corporate environment where business leaders are groomed

through progressive management responsibilities, it can be more important in professional service firms where leaders are chosen not because of their management capability but because of the respect they have earned as a practitioner in their chosen field. When pondering a leadership role, whether group leader, client team leader or managing partner, consider whether or not the role fits your skills. If you struggle with the administrative details of your own practice, imagine the struggle you'll have dealing with all the details of managing a group. Successful leaders communicate constantly with their people.

To be effective, communication is often inefficient and time consuming: for example, answering e-mail queries with a phone call or a personal visit. Further, to be effective, leaders must be motivated by the effort and accomplishment of the group, though they probably got the job because of their own individual effort and accomplishment. Will your ego allow you to make that transition effectively?

Learning Styles

Educators consider learning styles when developing curriculum - how can you use learning styles to increase the chances of getting your message across to all members of your firm. People typically fall into one of three different learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. That is people who learn by seeing, people who learn by hearing and people who learn by doing.

In order to capture the attention of all of the people in your group, consider expressing the message in ways that will meet the needs of each learning style.

A clearly articulated message supported by effective Power Point slides will capture the auditory and the visual learners. Group meetings where participation is encouraged and discussion is fostered will capture the people that need to be involved.

Conclusion

Every law firm I know cites the ability to communicate effectively as the most desired (particularly by associates) and the most challenging (particularly to law firm leaders). Leaders might improve communication by considering all three learning styles and crafting messages that will be received effectively by all members of the firm. We all filter the information we receive.

What are your filters? Are your filters getting in the way of the communication that you crave?

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1. What Leaders Allow Themselves to Know, Paul Michelman, Harvard Management Update, February 2004



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