



Fulcrum Search Science Inc. Are You Getting Your Message Across?

"I know you think you understand what you thought I said, but I'm not sure that what you thought you heard is what I meant to say."

Apparently the 500 most common words in the English language have more than 14,000 meanings. This averages 28 meanings per word. It gets more complicated. These meanings will sometimes change over time, and certainly from individual to individual. Add to this mix some 700,000 types of nonverbal communication and you might have to ask yourself "Am I actually sending or receiving the intended message?"

This question becomes particularly important in situations where you need to establish trust and rapport, to make an effective hiring decision, or to influence individuals and groups to take the action you request.

First Impressions

Whether you take a leading role in the public, private or not-for profit sector, a common scenario is that first meeting with your new team. What could go wrong? Well, maybe there are some hidden concerns: your age; your experience; how your mandate will affect us; the fact that you've come from a major competitor.

In one interesting case a new VP of Marketing found that his first impression would be established in a brief introduction of himself during a Canada-wide conference call. He would be talking to a dozen busy department executives. In preparing for this mini-presentation, he crafted a brief biography and a short list of some ideas that he felt would be of immediate interest to the group. He focused on his experience and what he perceived to be good marketing opportunities. Sounds basic, right? There were two things he had not considered. In remarking about his background, he made no connection between his experience and problems that were of current significance to the others. In offering some of his ideas, he used marketing jargon and, in effect, assumed that the listeners, all from other disciplines, would understand and be interested in his terms of reference.

TIP: If your objective is to strike up good working relationships from the start, the following will help you establish much needed common ground:

- Determine which issues are of importance to the others, and why.
- Begin by focusing on areas of agreement - lead with ideas that you have in common.
- Select terms, and use examples with which your listeners can identify.

Picking Winners

Have you ever interviewed a job candidate who you suspected could write the book on the position, yet had to be probed and prodded? The right hiring decision often depends on your ability to identify the best people, candidates who really will be able to help, operate like your star performers, and fit in. Sometimes all you've got to go on is the communication and the chemistry, or lack of it, in front of you! How do you get the most useful information out of the qualified individual who is not effective in "getting it across" during the interview process?

Let's look at the story of the "reluctant journalist." She was being interviewed for an office management position with a small environmental consulting company. When responding to a string of behavioural interview questions about her past, she invariably provided a minimum amount of information in each of her answers. The seasoned interviewer, however, eventually asked why she was not linking her experience in these areas to its usefulness in the office job ahead. She replied, "I thought if you had wanted that information you would have asked for it." From her journalistic experience, the norm for her was to ask questions until she got her answers!

TIP: If your responsibility is to keep the communication open and clear in order to obtain information on which you can make an important decision, remember to:

- Shape your questions - what / how / why is the ideal questioning sequence.
- Listen actively - probe, and never assume the candidate's meaning.
- Establish a dialogue - help candidates tell coherent stories about their experience.

Selling Ideas

How do you get past the cynical "flavour of the month" reception that sometimes crops up in resistance to important new ideas, systems, or processes? People generally don't buy into change unless they understand what is happening, and what's in it for them. Your task is to make that happen. Your choice of message, and how you present it, can determine your level of success, or your level of ongoing frustration!

A classic example of misguided communication occurred when the General Manager of a manufacturing plant with some 200 employees brought in a new, improved benefits package. He knew it would be important to communicate the features of the new package to his employees. They were assembled over two sittings in the plant's cafeteria to listen to the presentation. What they heard was a detailed account of the research and selection criteria, the features of the package, and an inference that the company had made a substantial investment on their behalf. What they did not hear were concrete references to problems they had experienced in making claims, submitting paperwork, or in processing times. The General Manager missed a wonderful opportunity to establish the common ground to which they could easily have related.

TIP: When you want to motivate others to take a personal interest in the problem at hand, these communication strategies can be critical:

- Research - provide facts that are relevant to the specific interests of your listeners.
- Convey benefits - spell out the "what's in it for them" for each of your points.
- Paint pictures - offer examples to create mutually understood context and meaning.

Information gaps and misunderstandings can impact all levels of operation. To put it bluntly, the words that come out of your mouth should mean the same thing to the person hearing them as they do to you. If your statement, directive, or presentation can't answer the question, "So what?", then ask yourself another question, "Am I really getting my message across?"

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