

Communication - Soft Skill with the Hard Result

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The weather is poor. The plane is behind schedule. The pilot has been awake twelve hours or longer. Pilot and co-pilot have never flown together before. In approximately 50% of airline flight disasters these are the common factors in play. Then a series of seven consecutive errors lead to tragedy. "The kinds of errors that cause plane crashes are invariably errors of team work and communication."¹

Hmm, errors of teamwork and communication cause airliners to go down, and we business folks tend to call these "soft skills."

Our focus here is on communication between people getting the work done in businesses. The exchange of information and expectations that's essential to successful business.

People are tired, projects are behind schedule, people haven't worked together before - wait a minute, this is sounding like the air crash factors and they may exist in tech companies, manufacturers, consumer products companies, retailers or any type of enterprise. Faster, better, cheaper have moved from mantra to persistent expectation.

Fewer people are around to do more work. Money is tight and margins squeezed. While resources, people and otherwise to do the work have decreased, customer expectations have not. Mutually beneficial relationships both external and internal are essential to business success.

Communication builds and maintains relationships and the cost of miscommunication is in both hard tangible dollars and more. A significant issue, validated by the fact that Amazon lists 692,188 titles on the subject of communication. Here are a few things to consider.

Communication is the responsibility of the sender

- Convey what you need to convey in language that the receiver understands. East coast Ivy League MBA speak may not be well understood by the west coast game developer. You may need an interpreter.
- Caution! - If you are a subordinate leader and your boss appears to not understand this sender's responsibility, take the initiative to ensure you know what is expected and when. Get clear. Don't say you understand if you don't. Remember it's your responsibility to deliver as expected so you better make sure what "as expected" means.



We know ourselves by our intentions; others by their actions

- Consistency between words, body language and actions is essential to avoid confusion.
- If there is big urgency around something, live it - big and demonstratively.
- If everything is an urgent top priority, nothing is an urgent top priority.

Multi-tasking and listening are incongruent

- Want to avoid miscommunication? Pay attention. Not just to the words but to the body language, the subtext and energy behind what is being said. Get tensions and observations that don't make sense clarified.

Double-check to ensure that people really do understand

- "Do you understand?" is not the right question. Questions that cause people to play back what you want them to understand, the actions you want them to take and the deadlines expected are the questions that prevent miscommunication.
- In deference to or sometimes fear of authority the right questions don't get asked.
- Who is doing what by when? Make sure meetings don't conclude and people go on about their business without knowing this. Many meetings could benefit from less rambling, fewer, smaller slides and more time getting clear on who is doing what, when.

A Look in the Mirror:

- Do you think that the people on your team don't get it?
- Are team members not delivering what you expect when you expect it?
- Are miscommunications causing your business, department or team to miss the boat?
- Are there excuses and smokescreens that are so prevalent that they have become cultural?
- In what ways is your approach to communication helping you get what you want - or not?

1. Safety Study NTSB/SS-94-01, 1994. National Transportation Safety Board, "A Review of flight Crew-Involved Major Accidents of U.S Air Carriers.
As reported in *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown and Company, Nov. 08, pg. 184. This book gets a two thumbs up recommendation!



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