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INSPIRING COMMUNICATION: USING MORE THAN WORDS

If you had to guess what percentage your words, tone of voice, and body language contributes to how a person understands your message, what would you say? Most people respond with the notion that words are the most important aspect of communication. However, research* indicates that your words only impact 7% of how a message is understood. Your tonality contributes to 37% of what is understood and your body language 55%. So what does this mean to you? Communication should be intentional.

Your Words

Ok, so studies show that your words do not impact a message as much as you thought, but nevertheless they are important. Effective communication happens when people not only share information and ideas with others, but when everyone's messages are understood.

Communication is a two-way process where feedback is the basis for understanding. Compare the following two statements.

(1) "Susan, you need to get your act together. You did not turn in those monthly reports on time. What is happening? I thought you were committed to this project."

(2) "Susan, do you have a minute? I noticed that your reports were late this month. It really impacted our ability to provide an accurate status to our customers. Your work is usually on time. Did something happen differently?"

The first statement immediately places blame on the individual and is likely to create tension in the workplace and barriers to future communication. The second statement focuses on the person's behavior and not the individual. It starts with an "I" statement versus a "you" statement and is very specific.

Finally, try to be timely when providing feedback. Instead of waiting until a person's annual performance appraisal, provide immediate feedback and informal feedback on a regular basis. Your words are your words. Choose them wisely and then look to your tonality.

Your Tonality

Who would have thought that tonality plays such an important role in communication? Well it does, and in this modern day of conference calls and other remote channels of communication, tonality bumps up to over 80% of how a person receives and decodes your message.

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Here is an exercise you can try on your own. Practice giving feedback by talking into a recorder. Listen closely to how you sound and ask others for advice. Practice your tone when you are all alone so that you send the right message in person and on the phone.

Your Body Language

Body language and facial expressions play the largest role on how a message is received. My mother was a master at this. All she needed to do was raise her right eye brow (my brothers and I called it the evil eye) and we knew to stop doing what we were doing.

People use body language differently. It is often influenced by our culture, backgrounds, and personal experiences. There is no standard way to interpret how others express themselves, but the key is to be aware of your own body language and those with whom you are communicating. Here is a quick list of things to keep in mind.

Eye contact – indicates interest

Body position – indicates level of engagement

Facial expressions – indicates perception

Remember - communication should be intentional. Words, tonality, and body language all impact how your message is received. Take the time to observe yourself and others because your body may stray from what your words may say.

*Mehrabian, Albert (1971), "Silent messages," Wadsworth, Belmont, California

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