

Staff Communication: Control, Filters, and Perceptions

by **Lori A. Hoffner**

Communication in a personal setting can be a tricky thing, but in the workplace, it can be downright complicated. With our staff, communication can be positive and productive and help us move our ideas and plans forward. Or it can be a frustrating experience leaving us to wonder "What language do I need to be speaking so they get it?" The best way to answer that question is to identify where the communication process is breaking down — is it in the control, the filters, or the perceptions? Understanding those key factors will help you facilitate a successful communication practice for yourself and your staff.

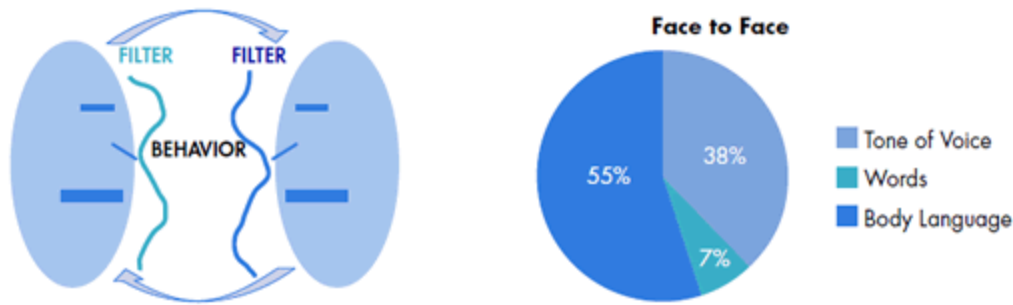
Control in Communication

In every situation there is an element of control in communication. We can elicit that control simply by the position we hold within an organization, or we can bring about that control in the communication style or tactic we choose to model with individuals. Ideally, that control should be positive. Our role as a leader, based on the origin of the word, means that we "set in motion," therefore, as leaders of our staff, it's up to us to model the expectations of communication.

The most positive way to ensure good communication is by recognizing what each situation calls for and the best way to convey the information to your staff. How you approach communication will be affected by the task at hand and the needs of employees. For example, does the situation call for a directive, a cooperative, or a nondirective communication style?

- **Directive:** The leader makes decisions and notifies the staff accordingly. This form of communication is useful with immature or less-experienced employees and when implementing deliberate decisions. The leader is interested in the employee's opinion so that decisions can be made on the selective integration basis of that information.
- **Cooperative:** The leader approaches communication as an equal among his or her staff, seeking collaborative solutions with experienced or veteran employees. The goal here is to work toward aligning team members' values and getting agreement through a cooperative communication style.
- **Nondirective:** This communication style delegates a broad task to employees. The competent or veteran employees pursue the set of objectives in a solution-focused manner. This style can be confusing if the goals and objectives are not clearly communicated.

In organizations that are not as successful and positive, the communication style may only be directive, leaving staff feeling isolated. If the communication style seems to be only a modified version of cooperative or nondirective, staff may question leadership and the direction of their work and overall mission of the organization. However, in a successful and thriving staff setting, leaders can weave their way through all these communication styles in one conversation and empower their staff to do the same. Additionally, successful leaders have the ability to recognize how to use all three styles when necessary. Doing so exemplifies and models for staff how effective communication can be achieved in a thoughtful and encouraging way.



Filter

I was recently talking with my husband about a work-related issue that was very important to me. As I was sharing my thoughts and concerns, I could tell by his response or, better yet, his lack of response that he was not tuned in. In fact, in my opinion, he was completely checked out. In my frustration, I snapped, "This is important to me and you're not even listening!" He apologized and then shared with me that he had just had a very unsettling conversation with one of his co-workers. He had a filter in place that was preventing him from really hearing what I was saying, let alone recognizing the importance the topic had for me. My frustration became a filter that further broke down the conversation. That's the thing with filters in communication. They can get in the way, and we may not even realize it.

A filter is something that can delete, distort, or generalize the message we're trying to share. And filters are in place for both the sender and receiver in every single conversation. Filters are part of our neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) or metaprograms, a methodology for understanding and changing human behavior patterns. Studies conducted in the 1970s by authors Richard Bandler and John Grinder claim a connection between the neurological processes ("neuro"), language ("linguistic"), and behavioral patterns learned through experience (Dilts, 2011).

Life coach Tony Robbins describes metaprograms as the "keys to the way a person processes information" (2014). We all have many different identifiable filters, such as the language we speak, the memories we have, our values and beliefs, or even our attitude at that particular time. One of the biggest filters in the workplace today is based on the generation with which we associate ourselves. Each generation has a distinct and preferred communication process, which is a direct correlation to metaprograms. When we don't follow that process, sometimes the perception is that we're not getting the message. The filter is in place, and rather than identifying what that filter is, communication breaks down. That breakdown can create a strained or even destructive work environment.

Case in point: Members of the Silent or Traditionalist generation (1930-1945) would prefer a hard copy of written communication versus an e-mail, and certainly face-to-face communication over a text message. However, for the Millennial generation (1980-1996), text messaging seems to be the preferred communication process, and they rarely take the time to talk on the phone or use e-mail, much to the chagrin of their Baby Boomer (1946-1964) or even Gen X (1965-1979) colleagues. Immediately there is a filter — the filter of the preferred communication process and, ultimately, the attitude regarding the perceived lack of respect between the generations. And

now, studies are showing that our youngest workforce, Gen Z's (1997-2015) prefer a face-to-face communication experience especially with their employers because technology can get in the way of understanding a person's emotions during a conversation.

How then does a message make its way between the sender and the receiver, and vice versa, with such filters in place? The challenge for us is to recognize for ourselves what filters we might have and how they are impacting the message. When I work with staff during in-house training, we practice how to acknowledge those filters and find a way to move past the possible barriers in an effort to create positive and productive behavior. Once my husband and I were able to recognize and acknowledge our filters, our neuro-linguistic programming changed. We were able to have a very beneficial conversation that addressed both my work concerns and the issue he had with his co-worker.

Perceptions

It's easy to understand then that every single communication experience can also be marred by perceptions. Those perceptions are influenced by the relationship we have with the person with whom we are communicating. The successful outcome of a conversation depends on appreciation at the relationship level. According to the Citrix Leadership Handbook (2011), communication consists of a factual level and a relationship level and how we choose to hear the message. Think of communication as an iceberg. Science tells us that when we see an iceberg in the water, the part that is visible is only about 20 percent of the overall object; the remaining 80 percent is under the water and unseen. Just like an iceberg, our communication is received as 20 percent factual information, and the remaining 80 percent is perceived based on the relationship level we have with the individuals. At that relationship level, the Citrix Leadership Handbook states that we use four "ears" to hear what is being shared:

- **Factual:** This receptive channel is mindful of the content of a message, asking, "What's it about?" "What's the matter?" or "What precise information do we have at our disposal? Many recipients tend to pounce on the factual side of the message, attempting to discover its meaning solely in a discussion of the facts.
- **Self-revealing:** This channel is an important ear for leaders and their staff because it can discern hidden information in a message. "What is my employee/ boss trying to tell me?" or "What is my employee's/boss's real concern?"
- **Affiliation:** This receptive channel is widespread. Accusations or allegations are perceived in messages where there are none. This ear hears messages in terms of "How is he/she dealing with me?" Some employees are oversensitive to this receptive channel. As a result, neutral messages may be interpreted as personally derogatory — with the corresponding consequences.
- **Appeal:** Employees who seek recognition and always attempt to show their best side tend to interpret messages with this ear. They hear a challenge in a neutrally worded statement: "What should I do?" The danger is that because of their overzealousness they may miss important information.

The ear we use to receive the information being shared with us is largely based on our relationship with the individual. Again, this becomes a filter that can delete, distort, or generalize the message. It is critical for leaders to understand the importance of this relationship factor.

Leadership styles can erode or enhance the communication they want to have with their staff. A leadership style that supports, encourages, and models communication as a positive and open experience helps to break down any negative perceptions. It allows individuals to recognize and acknowledge personal filters that might otherwise skew important information being shared.

Communication in Times of Conflict

No matter what kind of relationship we have with individuals or the positive and empowering environment we try to create, conflict can arise. Conflict is the perfect time for us to model the type of communication we desire in the workplace. It is then that our control can shine.

There are five simple things to remember with communication in times of conflict:

1. **Choose the atmosphere:** The most neutral location will help to create a sense of safety and openness to the conversation necessary to resolve conflict.
2. **Avoid obstacles:** Don't bring up past issues or conflict unless they are directly related to the issue at hand. Communicate directly and openly with the individual and encourage them to do the same.
3. **Heed nonverbals:** Your body language and nonverbal communication should match your words. Only 7 percent of what we communicate comes from words. The remaining 93 percent is our tone of voice and body language. Be aware of what your nonverbal communication is saying.
4. **Listen actively:** You have an expectation of the other person to be engaged during this time of communication. Engage with them in a way that demonstrates your desire to find resolution.
5. **Focus on "I statements":** By focusing on I statements; you identify your response to the issue and needs for resolution versus blaming and attacking the individual.

Conflict is going to happen; effective communication can help resolve conflict so that each person walks away feeling that his or her point was heard, and resolution is possible. Effective communication during conflict also eliminates perceptions based on filters and strengthens the relationship between leaders, their staff, and the organization. Take advantage of staff training opportunities to help your staff recognize how to lead in the midst of conflict toward resolution and the importance of emotionally based leadership and relationships with staff.

Successful Communication

With all these variables in place, it's amazing that we're able to communicate with one another at all, and yet we do. Choosing to be successful at communication is up to each of us, regardless of the role we play within an organization. Understanding the control necessary in different situations facilitates successful communication. Recognizing and acknowledging the various filters that might be in place when information is being shared reflects a level of responsibility and empowerment. The relationships that are built with colleagues are an important step to nurturing positive and productive communication. Those relationships also help to eliminate perceptions and potential conflict. Practicing and modeling successful communication creates a thriving and engaged staff. It's as important as the mission of the organization.

Lori A. Hoffner is the president of Supporting CommUnity, Inc. As a speaker, trainer, and consultant, Lori's mission is to encourage intentional, positive, everyday practices to create a confident and thriving environment for organizations and the communities they serve. She can be reached at Lori@SupportingCommUnity.com. For more information on trainings that Lori can provide for you and your team, <https://supportingcommunity.com/available-workshops/>