

Does Efficiency Apply to Communication?

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John was a senior executive at a high-tech company. Like most executives, he was extremely busy and worked diligently to be as productive as possible. He was disciplined in putting everything on his calendar to keep him on schedule. In especially busy periods he subdivided his time into 15-minute increments. He prided himself in getting a lot of work done every day, getting it done efficiently, and avoiding duplication of effort.

Maybe you are like John or know someone who is. What do you think about having an intense focus on being efficient? Does efficiency apply to all activities? How about communicating and working with people? Do people enjoy being part of an efficient conversation? Does avoiding duplication apply to communication?

People focused on efficiency often try to apply their productivity principles to their relationships. Some of those with whom they interact appreciate the brevity. They like short to-the-point conversations. But most people prefer a genuine conversation with a give-and-take dialog. They have a sincere desire to understand others' perspectives. They enjoy rapport building and getting to know people. In fact, they place as much or more value on relationships as on getting things done.

There are gender stereotypes such as those claiming that men prefer little talk and even one-word answers. Like "How are you? Good. And you? Good. Nice talking to you. Bye." Yet the reality is that more meaningful conversation is typically preferred by everyone. Another myth about communication is that you should only have to say something once. Many inexperienced managers as well as parents think they should only have to share their vision, plan, strategy, idea, or expectation once. When asked why others aren't following their lead, they confidently say "I don't know. It doesn't make sense. I told them." Then when asked "How many times did you tell them?" they reply "Once. That is enough isn't it?" If communication were only that simple.

Thinking that sharing an important point once is enough is a bit naïve. Saying something once, especially when not part of an interactive dialog, is often ineffective and even inefficient. Studies find that for people to really understand something, they need to hear it more than once. For people to consider something truly important, they need to hear it several times. Studies also find that for people to consider something true, they have to hear it multiple times and the more they hear something, the more they are likely to accept it as truth. Of course, there are also people who don't listen very well and need the repetition.

If you or others in your circle of influence think efficiency is paramount, consider that being too efficient in communication can waste more time than it saves. Not providing enough detail or assuming people need to only hear something once often leads to misunderstandings. In the workplace, it leads to wrong expectations, mistakes, missed deliverables, quality problems, and even safety issues. Overly concise conversations prevent people from understanding, being able to offer valuable perspectives, and gaining buy in.

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You may be thinking there are also those who need to be more concise. Yes, for sure there are. Some talk ad nauseum on topics that aren't deserving. Some overcomplicate that which is simple. Some bore people with more detail than is needed. There are even people whose requests take longer than the time needed get the tasks completed. There are also extreme extroverts who can't stop talking.

How much detail or repetition is enough? How long should you talk? How do you connect with others or gain buy in without wasting time yet not being too brief? Listed below are a dozen best practices to being an effective communicator. Assess how well you do at each:

1. Adopt the mindset that communicating is one of the most important activities you do and deserving of more time than you might logically think necessary.
2. Unless you are giving a keynote presentation, consider all conversations to be 2-way dialogs. Lectures are not enjoyable or effective for most people.
3. Start with the big picture before getting into the details. Explain the “why” before the “what” or the “how”. Give context to what you are communicating.
4. Know your audience and provide the level of detail that is appropriate for their ability and understanding. Most people are smarter than you might think.
5. When choosing to communicate something as an opportunity or a problem, choose the positive option. Be uplifting and appropriately optimistic. Build up people.
6. Pause after a few minutes to let others give their perspective. If you've been talking for more than 3-4 minutes, stop. Give someone else a turn.
7. When others are talking, listen. Show empathy. Be patient and slow to respond. Don't interrupt them unless they have clearly gone on too long.
8. Ask questions. Be interested in others' views. Make people feel heard. Seek to understand them. You may find that your ideas aren't always the best.
9. When emphasizing a point, repeat it but do so from different angles. Appeal to people's logic and feelings. Use facts and data but also examples and stories.
10. Don't be lazy in your communication like merely repeating yourself or increasing your volume. Apply the power of influence, not the power of authority.
11. Be authentic. Let people know the real you. Share your thoughts and feelings. Show emotion but do so appropriately, constructively, and respectfully.
12. Avoid using filler words that don't have meaning. Don't talk in circles with disconnected thoughts that make it hard for people to follow. Be easy to understand.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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