Effective Communication: Not As Easy As It Seems

Communication. It’s so easy—especially with all the technology we have at our disposal today. We dash off texts, tweets, e-mail messages, etc. without hesitation. However, there is a big difference between communication and effective communication. Effective communication is about more than just exchanging information; it’s also about understanding the emotion behind the information. Effective communication can improve relationships by building trust and respect, it can help us better understand a situation, and it can create environments in which creative ideas, problem solving, and collaboration can flourish. As a CIO, I know that effective communication is my friend; and yet, keeping on top of it can be a challenge.

Effective communication is important to IT leaders for maintaining visibility and credibility and for creating a positive perception of the IT organization. We can be excellent at providing technology, but without accompanying communication, the perception may not be the reality. Often the perception obtained from our messages is more important than the message itself and can be the difference between success and failure as an IT leader.

There are many types of communication, both internally within the IT organization and externally to the rest of the higher education institution. Externally, IT leaders may be communicating about new initiatives, about planned (or unplanned) outages, or about vision, strategy, and goals, or they may be communicating general marketing messages for the IT organization and its services. Regardless of the type of communication, the messages need to be purpose-driven, consistent, timely, clear and concise, and relevant to the audience.

Other key communication elements that I try to remember are to get my specific point across quickly by structuring the message with purpose and clarity, reviewing and editing the text, and using simple language that’s free of techy jargon. When crafting messages that go to a broad audience, I often have someone else review the text to catch missing words and typos and to make sure that my message is being conveyed properly.

One tactic I use to keep myself focused is to ask a set of five questions:

1. What is the event, issue, or information I want to communicate?
2. What do I need or want to say about that event, issue, or information?
3. Who needs to hear the message?
4. Who needs to deliver the message?
5. What tools and/or format should be used to deliver the message?

Once I can clearly articulate answers to all five of these questions, I can easily form the appropriate message to the right audience for a timely delivery.

One of the biggest communication gaffes is to address what we want our colleagues to know or what we think they should know rather than what they want to know. What we do in the IT organization is all about academic and operational performance. It’s not about technology. It’s not about how that technology works or even why we chose a particular technology. It’s about the value we are providing to the users and what it means to them. How is the technology useful, how does it help users perform their job better, and how does it improve processes, learning, and research activities? Without that value, the technology is just air, more “junk.”

One critical type of communication is project communication. Projects make up a large part of the IT organization’s work, and they involve a unique set of communications requirements. I have found that a key to implementing a successful project is to develop a communication plan as part of the overall project plan.

When it comes to large, multifaceted projects (e.g., an upgrade to our ERP system), we put together a communications subcommittee for the project. The subcommittee may include some of the same members who are on the project team, but often it includes others who are not involved in the day-to-day details of the project. Getting the right members for the subcommittee is important: we want them to understand the project goals, the user base, the impact the project will have on their work, and the fears that the affected users may have related to the changes brought forth by the project.

The way the information is portrayed is also important. That’s why when we are running a project that affects the entire university (e.g., an upgrade to the student information system), we recruit a member of the university’s marketing and communication team to join us on the project communications subcommit-
That person is an expert in communication and, therefore, can help us navigate the process in the most appropriate and timely manner.

Our project communication plans include a matrix of all the communications that relate to the milestones, goals, and training for the project. The subcommittee uses the same five questions identified earlier to establish the communication plan. For instance, when a new feature is going live, a multitude of communications may be sent out: a general communications piece in the university’s weekly news briefs; a specific e-mail to the deans and VPs; a targeted message to those people who require training regarding the new feature; and a notice on the website.

Finally, everyone in the IT field has to deal with outages, both planned and, unfortunately, unplanned. Communication about outages is vital. Failure to communicate appropriately makes the outage, especially if unplanned, worse than it actually is. Since finding a way to communicate quickly to affected parties can be very difficult, my team created a special e-mail account called “IT Service Alerts.” We use this account only for outage messages. Occasionally I’m asked to use this account to send some other technology-related information to the campus, but I have been adamant that it is to be used only for outages. This way the campus constituents will associate the account with outage information and nothing else.

As I said, communication is easy. We’re just not always conscientious about it. Effective communication takes ongoing effort. For me, it’s one of those tools that I will continue to hone.

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