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Changing the Way We Converse: Experts Encourage More Listening, Less Negativity

Editor's note: This article is part 1 of a 2-part series.

We could do this better, you think as you come away from a meeting. What should have been said wasn't said, people weren't listening to one another, and there was a lot of friction in the room.

We all come up against barriers that prevent clear, open and effective conversation. In organizations where certain communication styles are entrenched, it can be difficult to get past those barriers.

Moving Beyond Barriers

What gets in the way of better conversations?

"Time is a big issue," says speaker, author and coach Karen Susman, Karen Susman and Associates. "It takes time and patience to communicate effectively. We tend to think the other person needs to change. Also, an organization's leaders might not value 'soft skills.' Listening skills are limited, even though people tend to think they are effective listeners. And, change has to come from the top down and the bottom up. C-level folks have to buy in, lead, model, mentor,



promote and live the change."

We can sometimes create our own barriers when we forget to focus on the group's interests rather than our own.

"To successfully present ideas to a group, keep in mind that it's not about *you*," Susman says.

"Professionals can improve their effectiveness and group buy-in by saying—sincerely—"What this means for you is..." Many times professionals are so focused on their message or agenda, that they overlook the needs, fears and aspirations of their audience."

Hard-Wired for Conversation

Judith E. Glaser, CEO of Benchmark Communications, Inc.,

consults for Fortune 500 companies. She has written four best-selling business books, including "Conversational Intelligence®: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results," (Bibliomotion, 2013).

An Organizational Anthropologist, Glaser studies the way people converse and has identified the patterns that both facilitate and those that interfere with effective conversations.

"We are hard-wired for conversation," Glaser says. "Our language genes help us stay connected. Each human being maps the world through their experiences. They label those experiences and learn what to seek and

The first ingredient in conversation is truth, the next good sense, the third good humor, and the fourth wit.

- William Temple

(Continued on page 2)

Changing the Way We Converse

(Continued from page 1)

what to avoid. Through conversation, people have a way to touch and inspire, and engage with the outside world.”

Better Conversations Support Innovation, Partnering

“To get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of the culture, which depends on the quality of the relationships, which depends on the quality of the conversations,” Glaser explains.

Every person has instincts for greatness, she writes in a blog post titled “Quality Conversations: Alchemy for cultivating a healthy, thriving

organization.”¹

“We instinctively want to do well, to contribute, and to be included on the winning team,” Glaser says. “No one needs to teach us to have these desires; they are built into our DNA.”

“Yet many organizations often become toxic environments filled with politics, power, and control, arrogance, and competing egos. They develop into unwelcoming places with invisible street signs that say, ‘Don’t go there,’ ‘You can’t do this,’ ‘You don’t know that,’ ‘Save face,’ ‘Blame,’ and ‘Protect.’”

These negative elements erode relationships and take energy out of productive teamwork.

Among the solutions Glaser offers are more open conversations and candor; banishing organizational politics; and showing appreciation for great ideas.

“It’s not about how smart you are, but how open you are to learn new and effective powerful conversational rituals that prime the brain for trust, partnership, and mutual success.”

In the next issue, Judith E. Glaser will share her roadmap for successful, quality conversations in the workplace.

¹ “Quality Conversations: Alchemy for cultivating a healthy, thriving organization,” Psychology Today blog post by Judith E. Glaser <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/conversational-intelligence/201502/quality-conversations> (accessed January 6, 2016)

“We are stronger when we listen, and smarter when we share.”

- Rania Al-Abdullah



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Three Tips for Better Work Communication

Speaker, author and coach Karen Susman offers these things to remember for better clarity in work communications:

1. You are always communicating. Your body, your face, your expression, your clothes, your posture and your voice all convey messages. The moment you’re visible, you are communicating.
2. We all speak a different language. You don’t have to be from different countries or cultures to have communication minefields. You might think that everyone who speaks English would easily understand another English-speaking person. First, if someone has English as a second language, he/she still brings his culture to the table. Even regional differences in the U.S., i.e. New Yorker vs. Texan, mean that two U.S. born natives will be speaking a different language. For instance, I’m speaking ‘Karenese.’ That depends on my gender, age, upbringing, biases, history, successes, failures, education, religion, politics, finances and what I had for breakfast.
3. Since we’re always communicating and others are always communicating, and we each speak a different language depending on numerous factors, confirm that you both understand, instead of assuming this.

Resources:

Judith E. Glaser, Benchmark Communications, Inc. www.conversationalintelligence.com

Karen Susman, Business and Professional Development <http://karensusman.com/>

The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business, by Erin Meyer (PublicAffairs™, 2014)