Best Communication Practices for Leaders ©2010

C. Turner, PhD, Lt. Col, USAFR, Ret.

colleenturner.com

The effective application of the following communications guidelines can help leaders enhance mission success and morale for individuals, teams, and organizations. While some of the ideas might be enlightening and helpful, others may seem insulting in their obviousness. Regardless, they offer a structured communications approach for new supervisors and can help keep more experienced leaders on a positive track. Applying just one new concept can significantly enhance the impact of messages and subsequent outcomes. Leaders who commit to adhering closely to these principles and hold themselves accountable often achieve breakthrough results thought otherwise impossible. The ideas are simple but not easy to apply because engrained habits and fears about change can get in the way. Experimenting with these concepts can create openings for leaders to realize the power of thoughtful words.

1. Standards. Leaders need to communicate standards (especially new ones) multiple times in clear writing and speech. They also need to model and consistently enforce standards to optimize adherence. When standards are not met, something needs to happen starting with the lowest level of discipline called for to achieve compliance. Simply letting employees know they did not meet a standard is often enough.

2. Work Requests. Leaders should make work requests SMART (Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely). Leaders include a deadline or desired time and date in task requests because "by when" is a frequently missing message component. If a deadline changes, leaders don't leave subordinates hanging, they communicate it as soon as possible and explain why the change was needed.

3. Ask Before You Blast! Before leaders criticize subordinates, they ask questions. They find out about the employees' side of the story first and consider how their own communications (or lack thereof) might have contributed to errors or misunderstandings. Were expectations delivered SMARTly? Did workers have what they needed to do the job? A quick way to turn a dedicated employee into a jaded "whatever!" responder is to repeatedly criticize them for things they didn't know or were out of their control.

4. Connecting Communications. Leaders strive to link their most recent messages with their last ones. When they've focused on the need to make a particular project a priority but the next exchange is about a task that has nothing to do with that project, employees may be perplexed. Instead of concentrating on what is needed in the present, they may be distracted by wondering about the prior request.

5. Applaud Success—Even When It Is Not Yours. Leaders generously give credit to subordinates for their efforts. If someone succeeds in doing a special project for the boss or running a marathon, they acknowledge the effort. If a leader ignores accomplishments, subordinates may think the leader is frowning on the effort, extracurricular activities, or perhaps jealous of attention they want for themselves. Leaders let their supervisors know when subordinates do great work and offer valuable ideas—it's a feather in a leader's own cap for cultivating an environment of innovation and championing others' work.

6. Time Considerations. Leaders specify deadlines regarding work requests and collaborate with employees to ensure ability and agreement to complete tasks on time. "NLT 10 a.m. EST on Thursday April 12" can minimize misunderstandings that ASAP can create. Leaders consider work commitments in terms of leave and holidays and other tasks. When deadlines shift or cannot be met, leaders work with employees to re-prioritize or limit tasks to observe timeliness, decrease frustrations, and maintain quality.

7. Communicating Absences. Leaders let their employees know when they will be unavailable as soon as they can because subordinates may be left in a lurch if they don't know the bosses' schedule. When a leader is absent for more than 24 hours and does not have their normal access to correspondence, they create automated e-mail and voicemail "Out of Office" messages that include when they are returning, if they will be checking messages, and an available contact person if callers cannot wait. Leaders make it a priority to turn off or change those automated messages as soon as they return.

8. E-Mail Communications. Leaders check the spelling and grammar before sending an e-mail and make sure it includes the 5Ws (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) with clear response times. They use the exclamation sign, a read receipt, and follow up with a phone call for urgent needs. They check to make sure they have addressed <u>all</u> of the requests in an employee's message. Leaders know that without non-verbal cues, e-mails can be misinterpreted, and so they use caution with humor, figures of speech, acronyms, and sensitive issues. If in doubt, leaders ask another's opinion to make sure their message is clear, inoffensive, and would be acceptable even if it showed up in a congressional hearing.

10. Effective Listening. Leaders focus on the speaker, striving to hear their feelings as well as their words and look for a match between what others are saying and their non-verbal communications (as much as 85 percent of the message). Leaders make sure their subordinates are finished speaking before responding or interrupting. They paraphrase what was said and then ask if they have the correct understanding. Leaders choose their responses carefully keeping in mind that, "*We were given two ears but only one mouth because listening is twice as hard as talking."*

11. Giving Feedback. Leaders provide feedback that is mostly positive, empathic, well-timed, invited (if possible), accurate, behavioral, focused, understood, motivating, change-directed, and regarding issues within a person's span of control to change. In a clear, specific, and timely manner, leaders explain what will be better for an employee if they do XYZ. Leaders look for ways to let people know what they have done right to lessen defensiveness and are clear about what improvements are needed to prevent inferences that things are OK when they are not.

12. Receiving Feedback. Leaders view feedback as information rather than as personal attacks (even when it is intended as such) and realize the role of leader significantly impacts what subordinates share. When a leader feels criticized, they do not defend, justify, deny, or argue, and they let the sender finish his or her thoughts. Leaders delay their responses until they have had time to integrate their reactions, emotionally detach, and consider their choices. Leaders teach others the best ways to give them feedback and encourage employees to level with them without reprisal. Leaders know that what they don't know will hurt them in the end.

13. Dealing with Complaints. Leaders hear complaints as potentially useful information for making improvements rather than whining and find constructive ways to say "no" to employees when necessary. Leaders adopt an after action review outlook that nothing is perfect and reward folks for coming up with the most constructive criticisms for how to make improvements. Leaders use the process of inviting complaints to build "muscles" of non-defensiveness and improve what is in their span of control while elevating what is not. Leaders ask for solutions to problems raised and complain to their superiors not subordinates.

14. Giving Rewards. Leaders know you get more of what you reward and look for ways to specifically express appreciation for what they want. "I really liked the way you supported the conclusion of your report" works better than "Thanks" or "Good job!" Also, people vary in how they respond to compliments, promotions, awards, and such—one wants more pay or status while another wants time off for family. Leaders learn what expressions of appreciation work best for each person and strive to give them those forms of acknowledgement when earned.

15. Word-Keeping. Leaders keep their word as a promise. When they say things like, "I'll get back to you on that next week," "Let's do lunch when you get here," or "I'll ask personnel about your question," they make sure to follow through or acknowledge a need to change the plan. Leaders know that when team members commit to doing what they say they will do, trust, accountability, morale, and mission success can skyrocket!