

## Communicating Under Pressure

*Asking better questions can allow us to start thinking about the unknown, because questions focus our attention, and provide a theme for continued exploration.*

**E**ffective interpersonal communication has never been more important, given the fast pace and intensified competitiveness of the modern work world. The paradox is that those same issues make effective communication more difficult. A recent study showed that more than 60% of the employees surveyed felt increased pressure to raise productivity AND greater challenges communicating with managers and co-workers because of that pressure.

So what can you do if you know you're under pressure to enhance your communication ability and ultimately, improve productivity? First of all, remember, when stakes are high and the pressure is on, it's vital to strike a balance between focus on the goal and flexibility in how you'll get there. Try these five strategies to boost your communication ability in high-stress situations.

### 1. Laugh in the Face of Death

Nothing has the potential to relieve stress more than a well-timed (often irreverent) humorous remark. Laughter really is the best medicine in these situations, and can help to "grease the wheels" of communication.

John Cleese, of Monty Python fame, was asked if he thought there were times when humor might not help. He replied, "Yes, if you're attacking a machine gun emplacement, it's no time for jokes, pies in the face, or dropping your trousers to amuse the enemy ... but when the job is done, you had better find something to laugh about, or spend some time relaxing and having fun."

Fortunately, most of us are not actually facing imminent death in the workplace, so instead of stressing out and pushing through, how about lightening up, throwing a party and asking the team to look for a more creative/innovative/easy way? Just because they call it work doesn't mean it has to be, well, WORK.

### 2. Repeat After Me: I am NOT an Ostrich

Pressure causes most of us to dig in, focus, pull up the escape hatch, and close the stress-release valve. "Don't tell me to relax, dammit ... this tension is the only thing keeping me from falling apart!" Isolation works for short spurts, until we get interrupted or we seek answers from other employees.

Most complex work projects require the interconnected efforts and thoughts of many employees, and isolationism almost never produces good long-term results. So even if your instinctive reaction under pressure is to isolate yourself and just “get it done” you should instead reach out and work WITH others.

### **3. Seek Common Ground.**

One of the chief causes of miscommunication in high-stress circumstances is that often individuals who are working on the same project often actually have DIFFERENT objectives and priorities. One person may be primarily concerned with meeting a deadline while another wants to do nothing that would detract from quality while a third is mostly concerned with looking good to management.

By working with a team to identify all of their concerns and objectives, ultimately identifying COMMON objectives, you can deal with stressful situations from the perspective of helping EVERYONE get what they want. This up-front investment in first understanding the needs and priorities of the team or work group will pay off handsomely the first time you run into a significant “bump in the road”.

### **4. Be Response-able Versus Responsible.**

Change is inevitable; it is our response to change that makes or breaks us. Blaming others when things go wrong gives us the illusion of control. "I identified the source of the problem and, just as I thought, they screwed it up!" On the other hand, if we assume too much personal responsibility, the load gets unbearably heavy.

The best way to manage and lead change, or when things go wrong, is to identify areas of shared responsibility, and get to an agreement about consequences we all want to avoid (such as perpetuating past problems) and what we are going to do about it now. Rehashing the past is pointless and an energy drain.

### **5. Learn from your (and THEIR) mistakes.**

Effective business relationships in high-stress situations are based on learning and continuous improvement. Rarely does anyone get anything exactly right the first time. And if you have an EXPECTATION of initial perfection, or something close to it, you may have identified the source of most of your stress. When mistakes happen (yours or theirs) do you give and get feedback easily? Are you generally open, non-defensive, willing to listen, understand and use what you hear? If someone points out that you (heaven forbid) made a "mistake," can you see your customers, coworkers and managers as a learning resource?

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