Fast FACTS™

Taking Responsibility for Clear Communication

The meaning of our communication is based on the response we get from the other person. It is pointless to insist on a meaning that is lost on the listener, especially when the response you get is entirely separate from your intent.

In communicating with other people, what matters more: what we intend to convey, or the actual response we get? Who is responsible for your communication? The meaning of your communication is not what you think it means. The meaning of your communication is its effect.

For example, we might intend to pay someone a compliment, and if they take it the wrong way, what can we do about that? Would it make sense to argue that they should just take it as a compliment and chill out? Perhaps a better approach is to notice that for them to receive it, compliments must be delivered differently.

Choice Is Better Than No Choice

If we become conscious of how we produce responses in other people, we will have additional choices. If we're triggering an unintended response, understand how it happens. The trigger may be as subtle as tone of voice or a certain facial expression; these non-verbal cues say more than our words. If the relationship is important, let the other person know you want to understand what they are getting from you.

To deal with this more proactively, you might start by discovering what you do (or don't do) that leads to the other person's your strong reactions. This isn't meant to imply that you are doing anything wrong. It's only about the response you get: use it as feedback. Once you "own" how you influence an interaction, you can decide to either continue doing the same thing (and hope that the coworker or the circumstances change), or you can try something different.

I Said, She Said

Many coworkers get into automatic "calibrated loops"— similar to how "dysfunction" patterns get set up in family systems — you say this, and they say that, and you say... and the next thing you know nobody is listening and there's that all-too-familiar feeling again. So, what you can do is remember your goal, and look for alternative ways to get there. Does it make sense to wait for them to change, to act more cooperatively, to notice how inappropriately they are behaving?

Sharing Power in Communication

Communication, like driving in traffic, is a cooperative system. Contrary to what you might expect, the person who has the most flexibility in a communication situation will generally have the most control over that situation. How flexible are you? If there's a behavior you cannot generate — for whatever reason — there's probably a response you won't be able to elicit from that other person. And if the meaning of your communication is the response you get, that behavior might be exactly the one you need to produce.

Try Anything Else

If you're having a tough time influencing someone in the direction you want to go, trying flexing over to their world and first "meet them where they are." If you're producing an unintended result, remember your goal, and then get some feedback about how you are getting that result. With that feedback, you can plan out different ways to move with the other person toward your desired outcome.

There's a saying: when what you're doing isn't working, try anything else. When you maintain a state of curiosity, you can try doing something — anything — different, perceive the response, and learn from it. Did you move toward your goal? Ask for feedback. Keep experimenting.