

THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN MODERN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The quality of effective business communication has always had a great influence on the destiny of an idea or project, but never to such an extent as today. In the modern business conditions, decision-makers must have great deductive skills to notice the signals in the external business environment, especially in the situations when they are overwhelmed with information from various sources. In that sense, those who communicate with them have to be very efficient. Many businessmen, especially those who are at the top of a hierarchy, do not even try to hide the fact that they do not bother reading messages the purpose of which is not evident at first glance, messages that are too long or full of grammatical and spelling errors. The same goes for verbal communication – if we fail to present our idea to the listener in the first few minutes of a business meeting, our chances to persuade them will rapidly decrease as the meeting proceeds. To sum up, the quality of business communication has never been so important.

Key words: *conversation, internal business communication, empathic listening, nonverbal communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication within an organization is of extreme importance. Reforms are a logical and the only possible answer to changes, whereas fear and insecurity are employees' normal reactions to reforms. Internal communication can either mitigate or increase these problems, depending on whether and to what extent we have mastered business communication skills. This especially applies to the communication between employers and employees. A good communicator can unite the employees to *welcome* the changes and not to *reject* them. The way in which employers communicate with their employees always, and especially in times of crises, strongly affects trust building. Poor communication, or even worse, a lack of communication, is a strong indicator for an employee of things going in the wrong direction or of some hidden goals or intentions of the management.

It would be excessive to emphasise the fact that the motivation of an employee in the workplace is strongly affected by their satisfaction with their personal lives. Here, too, good communication is the main cohesive force that keeps the family together and creates a positive atmosphere at home, but also in the social environment of each individual. People coming from such a background are much more motivated to work.

Business communication skills are becoming a key competence, not only for leaders and managers, but also for all the employees. Rising unemployment, on the one hand, and unprecedented labor mobility at the global level, on the other hand, are shifting the balance of power in favor of employers. In other words, it is getting harder to find and keep a good job. Due to the economic crisis, growing competition and excess labour supply, employers are becoming more demanding with regard to their employees' expertise and their communication skills. How can employees and job candidates respond to this? When thinking about their own career, employees should keep in mind the following facts: first - the instability of the environment in which companies operate (economic, political, financial, etc.) is not temporary, but a long-term trend. Consequently, companies, as well as entire industries, emerge or disappear, turning the idea of job security into a dangerous misconception; second - instead of seeking the lifetime employment with one employer, one should work on their lifelong 'employability'. In turbulent times, people are likely to change not only their job, but also their profession, either voluntary or because they have to; third - companies are increasingly hiring contract workers instead of permanent employees, which further increases employee turnover; fourth – small-scale businesses are on the rise, due to their greater flexibility, lower costs, etc. It is estimated that more than 80% of

employees in the United States will soon be working in small companies, with less than 200 people. This means that employees' personal contribution will be easier to measure and compare. To sum up, companies are in the position to dictate the conditions on the labour market, and require their employees to have multidisciplinary knowledge and skills, diverse business experience, teamwork and leadership qualities [1].

Taking the abovementioned into consideration, it is quite confusing that most higher education institutions (faculties, colleges of vocational and academic studies) still place an emphasis entirely on providing students with specific professional knowledge in a certain field, whereas the quality of communication is a matter of individual affinities. Therefore, there are huge differences in terms of the quality of communication in practice, which is becoming the major limiting factor in achieving goals. Employers are generally dissatisfied with the communication skills of their employees, even of those who have graduated from prestigious faculties, primarily because of their inability to adapt their way of communicating to the business environment. This is especially apparent in teamwork and management jobs. The lack of standards in business communication (in this case, in internal business communication), has resulted in as many leadership styles as there are managers. Each of them gives themselves the permission to communicate in the manner they themselves consider appropriate. Consequently, a lot of organizations, especially the public sector ones, are facing intensive employee turnover, caused by the management issues and poor quality of internal communication.

A lot of people think that communication skills are a matter of talent, which cannot be improved. However, the truth is that success in communication can only be achieved through learning and experience, and that everyone who wants to become good at it, can become so. Employees with good writing, speaking and listening skills, able to understand subtle, non-verbal signals, and to adapt their communication to the specific business situation, are more likely to have a successful career [2]. Those who decide to improve their communication skills will notice that positive things happen to them quickly and everywhere - in their communication with colleagues, employees, clients, superiors, friends and family. Improving the quality of business communication yields numerous benefits: it produces results immediately, costs nothing, improves decision-making, helps to solve problems faster, produces positive effects in the long run and in all business segments (higher productivity, more efficient teamwork, better working atmosphere, etc.); the communication becomes emphatic and socially acceptable, difficult to be imitated by competitors; it complements all other activities in an organization, raises the profile of individuals and organizations, helps to establish and strengthen business relationships, boosts employees' motivation, strengthens employees' sense of belonging, and commitment, creates a winning spirit, and makes a company a great place to work. In other words, good communication strengthens the ties between an organization and all stakeholders [3]. This is the reason why top managers spend even 85% of their time at work communicating with others [4]. The importance of internal and external communication is also emphasized by the American Association of Managers. They send the following message to their colleagues all over the world: "Managers, your primary challenge today can be summed up in one word - communication".

2. THE ART OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

All of us have often seen that people who speak with inspiration, energy and power achieve far more in all the spheres of communication, especially in business communication. Good communicators are also recognized by the fact that they easily deal with unexpected situations. Then their self-confidence and ability to quickly organize their thoughts and communicate them in a clear and convincing way come to the fore. On the other hand, poor communication creates problems even when there is no need for them, and turns insignificant misunderstandings into conflicts. People often argue even about things they have the same opinion about. Due to poor communication, they keep emphasizing their differences. This causes unproductive tensions, which often lead to open hostilities. We might have some great ideas, but they will do no good to our company and our career if we are not able to present them in the right way.

In order to make our messages effective, we must present them in a way that is: practical, fact-based, concise, clear, with precise expectations, and convincing. What exactly does this mean? [5].

- Providing practical information means providing the recipient with something that will help them perform a task, understand a situation, etc.
- Presented views and conclusions should be supported by convincing evidence. The information sources have to be credible, and accessible to the recipient.
- To present an idea succinctly means to be concise and straight to the point. Readers are especially irritated when they have to search for the point through a bunch of facts and numbers.
- To present an idea clearly means to communicate all the important aspects of a problem. This request, which only at first glance contradicts the previous one, can be described in the following manner - Say everything that is necessary, but not a word more than that.
- Clarifying expectations and responsibilities means clearly explaining what we expect the recipient to do. In other words, non-personalized responsibility does not impose any obligation.
- A message will become convincing if we explain the recipient the benefits they will get if they act accordingly.

Our listeners are sometimes embarrassed to admit that they do not understand what we are talking about, especially in the presence of other people. If the topic is not especially important to them, some listeners will rather passively 'endure' our story, which they do not understand, than ask for clarification. In order to understand certain things we

usually have to make some effort, and people are usually not willing to do that. In any situation, the inability to understand what the other person is telling us significantly reduces our attention and interest. *Understanding* is therefore the first and most important step of successful communication. This, however, does not imply understanding only in a technical sense, but also accepting what the other person is saying.

If our listeners think that what they are expected to do is impossible, wrong or illegal, and if we have not managed to build a relationship based on complete trust so that he can tell us what they think, we can be quite sure that from that moment, they will think only about how to find a good excuse for stopping communication. *Trust building* is a basic condition not only for healthy communication, but also for all other positive processes within an organization. Trying to develop healthy communication in a situation where there is no trust between people is the same as putting a façade on a house that is falling into ruin.

Regardless of whether we are addressing an individual or a group, it is always necessary *to plan in advance what we want to say*. It will help us not to lose sight of the goal even in case of unforeseen circumstances, and to channel our communication in the right direction all the time.

Good preparation should help us to think less about what we need to say, and focus more on the listeners and their needs. A good knowledge of the topic we are talking about not only reduces the possibility of being surprised with unpleasant questions, but also raises our self-confidence at the very beginning, which does not remain unnoticed by the audience. The first step of the preparation is a detailed study of the topic we will be talking about. The aim is to know more about it than the audience, and much more than what we plan to communicate. It is also important to ask ourselves some questions after each completed chapter, which we can expect the audience to ask us, and answer them. The most important facts should be put down on paper even if we know them by heart, so that we would not forget them at a specific moment. This is followed by writing a concept, then reading and rehearsing the presentation. The speaker who reads the text is considered incompetent by the audience. Moreover, when we look at the paper, we break the eye contact with the audience, thus disrupting the most important channel of nonverbal communication. As soon as we stop looking at the listeners, something else will draw their attention. Furthermore, learning the text by heart is not advisable as then it is easier to get confused, and the audience will immediately notice the facial expression that accompanies the recollection. That will make us look more like an insecure student at an exam, than like a truly self-confident person, thoroughly familiar with what he/she promotes.

Knowing the audience and adapting the performance accordingly is half the battle. If our listeners do not understand the words we use, they will neither understand our message. It has already been mentioned that people quickly lose interest in things they do not understand. Better understanding is ensured not only by the correct choice of words and phrases, but also by the correct pronunciation (diction), proper speech rate, varying pitch and tone of voice, emphasizing important points, etc. Pronunciation mistakes damage the speaker's credibility, and might even make them sound funny. We should never forget that 55% of first impressions are made by nonverbal communication (38% by the tone and pitch of the voice, and only 7% by the facts we present). So, we should *keep our body language under control*. People are aware of the manipulative power of words and unconsciously relate them to the speaker's gestures. If they notice a discrepancy between what they see and what they hear, they start doubting and focusing even more on nonverbal signals. The speaker's *posture* is first noticed by the audience and immediately embedded in their memory. It is an important indicator of our self-confidence. Upright posture, with straight shoulders and evenly distributed weight on both legs, make the impression of a confident, goal-oriented, intelligent and friendly person. A *smile* is seen as a positive and universal facial expression. It is considered a sign of friendly intentions and good mood everywhere in the world and in all the situations. During a conversation, people maintain eye contact for 70% of the time while speaking and over 80% of the time while listening. When we smile at other people, we send them a message that we like them and that we are in a good mood, and they would react in the same manner. Furthermore, when we smile, our brain produces the happiness hormone, endorphin, which makes ourselves feel better, too. This, of course, implies a warm and sincere smile, which engages not only our lips, but our whole face. Laughing is a much stronger expression of the positive mood, and in business communication, it usually means 'the work is done'. *Eye contact* is vital for the successful face-to-face communication. Eye contact while speaking suggests openness, honesty, trust and interest. It also shows that people are confident and believe that their perspective is the right one. On the other hand, people who avoid making eye contact are perceived less persuasive, less trustworthy, shy, fearful and insincere. Avoiding eye contact often implies that a person knows something that they do not want to share with us or have some hidden intentions. We should not look directly into someone's eyes, but at their whole face.

Once we manage to integrate eye contact and speech, our message will be much easier to understand and accept. It is important to know that listeners can remember only what they can imagine. More than 90% of the information our brain processes are received through the senses of vision and hearing. The absolute domination of the so-called visual media (television and the Internet) is based on this fact. In addition to being more effective, the use of demonstration makes a message interesting, and at the same time helps the listeners remember it for a longer time. Learning through play is not just a privilege of children. The use of visual aids, vivid language and inspired speeches help the audience to get the same impression as we have, i.e. to see what we see, to hear what we hear, to feel what we feel. Finally, it steers the conversation in the preferred direction. The human brain thinks in terms of pictures, and we have to keep this fact in mind when preparing a presentation. This is the reason why the communication by phone is extremely demanding, because all we get are words and voice pitch variations.

3. BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Even a message formulated in the best possible manner can be misunderstood by the recipient in the presence of distractions.¹ That is why it is *important to analyze potential barriers to effective communication*. Although, at first glance, they might be associated with technical problems, nowadays technical problems are not so important. The main barriers to effective communication are psychological ones: prejudices, expectations, attitudes, previous experience, the interference of emotions, etc. Therefore, it is important to get to know your audience as much as possible before addressing them, and to try to personalize your message whenever possible, i.e. to adapt it to the recipients. An important part of getting to know the audience is to know the level of knowledge they have about the topic that will be discussed. People will lose interest both when our message is too complicated and oversimplified. Excessive messages have a similar effect.

Good communicators know that an attitude is often more important than facts, and they try to awaken positive feelings in their listeners by their performance. Communicators assess each other as humans first, and then they weigh up their views. In order to accept somebody's views, we must accept them as a person. Arrogance, intrusiveness and commanding attitudes automatically lead to resistance, which significantly complicates the acceptance of an idea or proposal. People also do not like being taught the obvious, because they perceive it as disrespect. Criticism has similar effects, especially if it is done by a person they do not know well enough. They should understand our recommendation as if it were own decision, and not as the choice we have made instead of them. An important rule of communication should always be kept in mind: *'In order to be received properly, a message must be both well understood and accepted by the recipient'*.

People tend to *see and hear what they want to see and hear*. Together with their *previous experience*, this can change our message so much that it loses its purpose. It would be good if people were open-minded and objective when analyzing others' presentations, but it is rarely so in practice. Those who want to convey a message need to be aware of this imperfection. Only then can they devote themselves to overcoming the differences, but carefully and subtly so as not to irritate the audience.

Subjectivity and prejudice are very bad for those who send messages, because they are always noticed by the audience. If we do not like somebody, it is pointless to pretend to be cordial, because they will regard it as insincerity. The only way out is to accept what we feel about them, analyze the causes, and then try to find out the things that we agree about and what our common goals are. It is important to believe that everyone has some quality that can serve as the basis for cooperation.

As an organization grows, *more and more intermediaries become involved in communication*. This is an inevitable consequence of developing, which has several negative effects. It becomes impossible for those who have a message to communicate it to recipients in person. Each intermediary in the chain adds some personal touch to the information and therefore the recipients often get a completely different message. This problem can be solved by reducing the number of intermediaries, i.e. by trying to address the target group directly as often as possible. This is especially important when talking about some crucial topics. In such situations, written communication is the best solution, whenever possible. To this end, we can use the company website, mailing list, paper or electronic publications, noticeboards, etc.

One of the key things for successful communication is *the willingness to hear feedback*. Most people tend to overestimate the importance and quality of their work, and the same is true of communication, as well. We can solve most of communication problems without asking communication experts for help. It would be enough to observe the reactions of the audience carefully, ask them for an opinion, encourage them to be honest in their assessment, accept criticism, etc. Thus, we get important guidelines for improving our own communication, but also show that we respect the listeners.

Communication styles are very important in the *manager-employee relationship*, especially when making plans, delegating responsibilities, and monitoring. Honest and open communication in both directions, and such an atmosphere in which everyone's opinion is respected, make employees accept each task as their common project, to which they want to make a personal contribution by doing their best. It is essential that the manager involves them from the very beginning, i.e. during the planning phase, because then they will accept the project as their own, and it will remain so until the end. Employee monitoring is the most delicate phase of any business. Employees usually perceive it as control, and their superior's attempt to catch their mistakes and punish them. A good communicator knows how to give this activity a positive connotation. Here, too, positive communication is the key. We need to convince the employees that the main aim of monitoring is taking care of the organisation and themselves. During the implementation phase, the employees and their superiors should perform monitoring together. They should also prepare the final report together.

4. KEY TRAITS OF A GOOD COMMUNICATOR

Contrary to popular belief, eloquence is not the most important quality of a good communicator; it is *empathy*. This trait is best described as follows: 'Put yourself in someone else's shoes' or 'Look at things from other person's perspective'.

¹As a saying goes, 'Nothing is so simple that it can't be misunderstood'.

Empathy is often equated with pity, which is wrong. Empathy is much more than that - it is taking care about other people's needs, as well as showing a sincere desire to help. Empathy is vital in trust building.

Cordiality is the next important trait of a good communicator. Most business and management schools teach their students how to become experts in communication. This implies developing the following types of behavior: formality, politeness, organization, accuracy, precision, tidiness, respect for the dress code, etc. These can really impress the listeners, but at the same time, can scare them. If we want to distance ourselves from our listeners, they will want to do the same. Business is a serious matter, but it involves emotions, too. On the contrary, emotions are very important in business decision making. Cordiality is not a limited resource, and should not be 'saved' only for 'special occasions'. On the contrary, the more cordiality we show, the more we get. The benefit of exchanging positive emotions is not only a better business result, but an entirely good feeling, which accompanies us throughout the day, and which is called job satisfaction.

The way we express ourselves is as important as the point we want to communicate. The proper use of words, clear speech, appropriate tone and pitch of voice, flexion, emphasizing important elements of speech, posture and gestures, vivid language and energy, strongly support our message, increase the listeners' attention and credibility of spoken words. On the other hand, an unarticulated speech, with too much or too little enthusiasm, without paying attention to the reaction of the audience, will definitely undermine even the most convincing arguments and dramatically reduce the chances for the success of the conversation.

Rehearsing the performance means 'paving the path' to a successful conversation. Many people give up at the beginning, claiming that talent is crucial for this. Most people prefer written communication, which is why emails and SMS messages are predominant today. However, the truth is that conversation can be learned. As in any other field, talent is important, but definitely not crucial for success. Several types of behavior, if adopted as our daily practice, can significantly improve our communication. First of all, we need to *rehearse the performance several times*. This is actually what politicians, professional leaders and other public figures do, so why wouldn't we? If we repeat what we want to say several times, we will think less about our own presentation at the meeting, and pay more attention to the audience. It is good to behave in the same way as we will behave in front of the audience. It is also useful to record and listen to our presentation, because what we hear while speaking is not the same as what our listeners hear. We can ask some friends or family members to listen to our presentation and give us feedback. *Reading high-quality literature* is of great importance. It has always been a valuable resource of expressions, and today, when conversation has narrowed down to scarce vocabulary, adapted to electronic media, this can give us a great advantage. Literary language is characterized by beauty, vividness, richness of expression, taste and precision, and these characteristics are at the 'top of the pyramid' in verbal communication. *Conversation with polite and educated people* is also useful. Active, two-way communication with people from whom we can learn a lot, if practiced it for a longer period of time, will have better effects than attending courses or learning from textbooks.

It is not easy to *overcome anxiety and insecurity*. Some scientists claim that the fear of public speaking is at the top of the list of fears. A lot of speakers sometimes forget what they wanted to say in the middle of their speech, or cannot find the right words, or forget the text, or get into panic and start stuttering. The easiest way to overcome fear and self-doubt is by repeating the activity that causes them. And with introspection and learning added, every new attempt will result in greater self-confidence.

Being a good listener is one of the most important traits of a good communicator (as a saying goes: 'You have often heard that someone is criticized for talking too much. Have you ever heard that someone is criticized for listening too much?'). This form of behavior is directly related to empathy. By listening carefully to somebody, we show not only that we are interested in their problem, but also that we respect them.

Some people are so much 'in love' with their own perceptions that they are ready to engage in open conflicts to defend them. *Exclusivity and egoism* have never led to efficient conversation. If we show that we are genuinely interested in what someone is saying, we contribute to more than a good atmosphere at the meeting. In this regard, *Dale Carnegie* said: 'You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you'. Enter the world of other people and let them into yours, and the magic door will open'.

To be tactical means to be interesting, but moderately. The lack of tactic usually manifests itself through two types of behavior: excessive seriousness or excessive negligence. In the first case, the speaker tries to say everything they know about the topic and fascinate the audience with their knowledge, burdens the story with unnecessary details, accumulates facts, etc. Such speakers are usually fascinated by their own role. In their 'brilliant performance', they give answers to all potential questions in advance, leaving no room for different opinions from the very beginning. Such conversation style can be described as a 'Pyrrhic victory', because the fact that the audience does not oppose them openly does not mean that they agree with their views. On the other hand, a tactical communicator can inspire the audience to engage more. The audience should feel as if they were dominant and expected to make decisions. Such a communicator uses facts and arguments moderately and purposefully, never forgetting what the goal of the meeting is.

On the other hand, there are speakers who try to entertain and charm the audience at any cost. Being witty sometimes helps to 'break the ice' and relax the atmosphere, but anything beyond that would be excessive. If the main topic of the meeting is pushed into the background due to such communication, it means that the wit has turned into frivolity. Sometimes it happens that the speaker gets so carried away that they do not even notice that they have crossed the line of good taste. Dark humor is very risky in business situations, and instead of laughter, it can provoke reactions ranging between disbelief and shock, on the one hand, and condemnation and contempt, on the other hand.

Tactical communicators communicate serious things in an interesting way. If they have initiated the meeting, they state the main reason at the very beginning. During the meeting, they never forget what their main goal is, and do not let their story go beyond its purpose. They are positive and empathic all the time, i.e. each their gesture is a sign of good will, interest and understanding for others' views. They are never subject to bad mood or euphoria. They are refined and have a good taste. It is their knowledge and personal virtues that others get interested in, and they charm the audience with their wit, optimism and enthusiasm. They express themselves vividly, and their messages are well controlled, strong and effective. They know that the audience likes to have fun while learning new things. So, after the meeting, everyone feels good, and remembers the basic message.

It is important to remember the names of participants because it shows them that we are interested not only in their problem, but also in them as a person. In this regard, *Dale Carnegie* said: 'Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language'. When we are at a gathering where there are a lot of participants and a lot of noise, it might happen that we do not hear the name of a person when getting introduced to each other or we hear it wrong. In such a situation, it is not indecent to ask them to repeat their name. It is also acceptable to write down other people's names, e.g. in the order as they are sitting at the meeting or to arrange their business cards in the same way. Another useful technique for remembering a person's name is to keep repeating their name to ourselves while listening to them, in order to make a connection in our memory between the name, person, and what they have said.

It is common to address people we have just met formally (using Ms..., Mr...) or using a title (Director..., Professor...), especially if those people are older than we or higher in rank. If a person wants us to address them by name, we can do that, but even then we should avoid doing that at the beginning of our cooperation and when we are getting introduced to each other. At least once when we are getting introduced to each other, several times during the conversation, and always at the end of the meeting, we should say the name of the person, but we must be careful that it does not seem affected.

Show your desire to get to know the person you are communicating with better, because it will be useful for you both during that meeting and in the future cooperation. Everyone likes it when other people are interested in them, because they perceive it as a kind of respect. Of course, our questions must be appropriate to the situation. At some social gatherings (informal socializing), questions relating to family, place of residence, hobbies, mutual friends, etc. are acceptable. In business situations, such questions can be considered inappropriate or an attempt to get intimate with someone (especially at the beginning of cooperation). In business situations, questions about business-related topics are acceptable, e.g. enquiring about the company from which the person comes, business-related events, business environment, the person's job, etc. Anyway, questions should be asked in a friendly tone and unobtrusively, so that the person does not regard them as an interrogation. Closed questions should be avoided (the 'yes/no' questions), and open-ended ones should be asked instead, so that the other person can give an extensive answer, and in a way that suits them best. Thus we would get much more information and, at the same time, make the person feel comfortable.

Get familiar with the preferences and expectations of the person you are talking to in terms of communication. In the times of globalization, accompanied by the introduction of universal communication patterns (with an aim to speed up conversation), a good communicator should do the opposite – they should try to discover specific ways of communication that other people prefer. Their effort to get closer to other people in this way, as well, will be understood as a kind of respect, and can bring them important benefits.

5. CONCLUSION

The main consequences of globalization are changes, which have become its trademark at the same time. We can notice that these changes are holistic, deeply rooted, and dramatically rapid. The speed at which they happen is especially challenging for businessmen. Everything is changing so fast that it is hard to keep pace with the changes. It also affects the way we communicate. It has been noticed that nowadays information is being shared faster than it is generated, and keeping up with the times does not only give us a sense of power, but it is the power itself.

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