

Communication – Are You?

Real Life Lessons Learned is a series of brief discussions that deal with the hard knocks, bruised shins, laughs, frustrations and joys of being in business. It is interesting to see that, according to the 2004 Census report, businesses with 1 to 19 employees comprise over four million firms—meaning 20.4 million employees with annual payroll of over \$530 million.¹ The same report indicates that the total receipts for 2002 for these size firms were over \$2.8 billion. The 2004 data regarding receipts was not published. Our perspective is that Small Businesses drive a major aspect of the economy and as with any business, began with the idea of one person and then expanded. Your business may be the legal entity of Sole Proprietorship or you developed with partners and are legally a Partnership or even transitioned to a LLC or “S” Corp. The realities are that you have walked an exciting road with many challenges and successes. Yet, every company looks at ways to improve in one or more of the critical components of how to make our business better. NCDCS, Inc is a trusted partner desiring to see you reach your desired level of efficiencies and success.

I knew that I just had this conversation with that vendor the other day or was it with that same cantankerous customer that knows it all? What were they really saying? Man, I just don't get why the employees seem to have this sour look and no one is paying attention to what I'm saying. I hope that all my points in today's meeting really got through to them this time because I'm tired of going over the same points!



What is communication all about?

The classical definition is:

Noun

1. The imparting or exchanging of information or news
 - a letter or message containing such information or news
 - the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings
 - social contact
2. (communications) means of connection between people or places, in particular
 - the means of sending or receiving information, such as telephone lines or computers : satellite communications | [as adj.] a communications network.
 - the means of traveling or of transporting goods, such as roads or railroads : a city providing excellent road and rail communications.
 - the field of study concerned with the transmission of information by various means.

¹ <http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/smallbus.html>

WHAT Is Business Communication Really About?

We all know that to promote our products or services the fundamentals of good communications are an absolute. We either think or assume that communication is just common sense. Well, as you can ascertain in the world around you, good sense isn't common. The interesting aspect regarding communication skills is that we do not always look at the full context of it. You retort, "What do you mean Tom? I tell folks everything they need to know; I get the information out!" That's fine and dandy if you're a radio announcer or an academic who lectures about your business. Yet, are you having a dialogue that universally communicates so that each person is clear on your full intent and even more important, do you hear and understand him or her? Ah-ha, the other side of the communications coin, LISTENING.



Here are some interesting statistics² regarding listening:

- * 85% of what we know, we have learned by listening.
- * 75% of the time we are distracted, preoccupied or forgetful.
- * 50% of the time do we usually recall immediately after we listen to someone talk.
- * 45% of the time we spend listening.
- * 20% of the time do we remember of what we hear.
- * Less than 2% of us have had formal education about listening.
- * We listen at 125 to 250 words per minute, but think at 1,000 to 3,000 words per minute.
- * More than 35 business studies indicate that listening is a top skill needed for success in business.

So I'm going to challenge you in this short topic to play around with your communication skills. I'd like you to read this out loud and see if you'll listen to yourself. Then I'd like you to have someone else read it to you.

In keeping stride with what is 'Real Life Lessons Learned', I'm going to keep the primary focus on the small and medium businesses (SMB). Corporations and even the larger 'medium' businesses can hire communications managers as part of their Human Resources teams. OK, I know, having been a part of large corporations and such, you're right, nobody gets it 100 percent correct. So for the SMB environment, it is even more critical to look at what is going on in our communications.

The fundamentals of communications are applicable across all forms of business entities. Let's face it, communications is all about life! So I'm going to start out with what is one of the most interesting environments to hone your skills, the Sole Proprietorship. We will not only look at the fundamentals of communication but we'll dance around some of the technologies as well. This is a quick review, and we cover this in more detail in our Life Lessons Learned for SMB's Seminar and e-book.

² Listening, Trinity College - <http://www.trinity.wa.edu.au/plduffyrc/library/study/listen.htm>

Sole Proprietorship

When I started my small business life, I was a true sole proprietor. I was it, and that meant I did everything. I did the marketing, sales, bookkeeping, trash, and on and on. Oh yes, I even did the work. So what's the issue with communications when you seem to be the one-man show? The simple fact is that each of us is an influencer. How we communicate influences our interactions and outcomes with our customers, vendors, and others that may offer support to the one-man show, that even means our spouses if you are married. So I needed to hone the skill I had. Not only to communicate with all those I externally interacted with, but I had to learn how to communicate with myself. This is key to keeping my various roles in the business rational and flexible, being able to interact with the outside activities in line with a specific role. You ask, "What did you just say?"

What I mean is that if you're in the sales role you need to speak sales. If you're marketing, speak marketing. To be specific to the role you're in, you need to know how to communicate effectively in that position. Talking technical in the marketing role can get someone confused and it might even be you.

Then as I learned, when you add employees and grow the company, all of the communication fundamentals really kick in. How do you communicate with your employees in addition to maintaining those communication cycles that you are already engaged in? Your world is taking on a new and complex dimension...more human interaction!

So what are the key elements that need to be looked at and honed?



First and foremost is: **Who** is communicating. We briefly covered this a moment ago. Let's summarize several of the key communicators as: Owner, Employee, Customer, Vendors, Financial Institutions, Accountant, and of course your Attorney. Oh, don't forget your spouse! We can continue the list but as it is, we first have to remember with whom we are attempting to mutually share information. Not only do we have to understand that each person (personality) is unique, we have to make the effort to understand the second fundamental element.



How they communicate. Several of the simple techniques are part of the 'duh' factor: Verbal, Written, Non-Verbal and Not at all. The elements we're not going to expound on here are tied to the individual's personality, backgrounds, expertise and desire to share information. We cover that in our seminars and e-book.

Now we all know that this is common sense information, correct? We would hope so, but if you really take a moment to consider the **Who** and **How**, you have to admit that many times we don't pay attention to the person as much as we desire to give or receive the data. This is especially true in our 21st Century information age. OK, can you properly decipher, MBFL? Oh, so you are a text message expert and nailed this one. I'm not, so for the most part I don't have a clue on this one.... I asked my 25-year-old daughter and the cryptogram is none other than, "My Best Friend in Life". So whom are you talking with, a 20-something technocrat or that 50-something

accountant who thinks they are a lawyer. Know whom you're speaking with and how they will receive or present information.



Here comes the fast dance. What are the communication ***Tools***? There are books and miles of paper on research regarding this. Here are a few of the simple ***Tools*** of which some are technical and others are not. Several technical tools and derivatives:

- The phone system
- Computers including: email, Intra-net, Internet, blogs and business software
- Process applications
- Inter-office paperwork including: Forms, Charts, Notes, Stickies, Bulletin Boards, White Board and Inter-office Memos
- White Board
- Bulletin Board
- Procedures
- Processes

The question now is: Are you using these and if so, how effectively?



This leads us to the communications ***Inhibitors***. We could write about scores of Inhibitors, but here are a few that seem to be predominant in the SMB/Sole Proprietorship environment on a whole.

- YOU Think they know it:
 - Owner viewing the Employee: That's their job or That's what they were hired for
 - Employee viewing the Owner: He/she Won't say or they Can't articulate
- Watch what I do – the monkey see monkey do approach but no one really understands
- No Process or Procedures – This is so common it is inane
- Poor Listening Skills
- No Communication Tools
- Not a big talker
- Full Plate, Spinning Hats
- Trust Factors
- Power Factor – This complex inhibitor includes:
 - Know it all
 - Lack of or refusal of Information transference
 - Can't get the info out/Head locked
 - Knowledge is Power
 - Knowledge is Security
 - I'm the Boss
 - What do you have to offer?
 - Who do you think you are?
- Data Factor – usually questioning:
 - Is this Information that fits?
 - What is the source of Knowledge?
 - Is it from a Credible Source?
 - How to use the data/information?

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With all of this now floating through our brains and getting us to think, reflect or even get emotional, the good news is that we have all of the Communications ***Influencers*** to deal with.



When you really think about it, what and who influence your communications. Often it is directly the person or group you are talking with. There may be the underlying effects of your most recent communication with someone or you're thinking about a pending communication cycle that impacts how you are engaged in the present. So we can consider some of the Communications ***Influencers*** as:



Human Influencers - Spouse, the Bank, Other Financial Institution, Employees, Customers, Vendors and Peer Groups

With Humans, one must look at:

- Understanding Alliances
 - Who are they?
 - What impact do they have?
 - How to Develop positive association

Additionally there are Books, Trade Journals, Internet and other



media.

So now you know **Who** and **How**, you've got some **Tools** in your bag, and you've identified some **Inhibitors** and **Influencers**. So now what?

The next key fundamental is **What** to communicate. Oh come on Tom, that is so obvious! "Really?" Then why is it that there are those that keep looking at us with quizzical frowns? Have we covered some key areas?

- Strategy – What are your business ideas, strategy goals, and objectives? Do you know?
- Processes - What are they? Do you have them well identified and written?
- Procedures – Same questions as Processes
- Expectations – What are they? Do you have job descriptions?
- **THANK YOU!!!** – Do you ever say it? Why not? If you don't...There are consequences that are covered in the e-book and seminars.
- Data and Information – Do you have this in any form, format, database or is it all in your head? Do you know how to extract it and effectively get it to those that need it?

Lastly, for now, we need to look at the real **Heart to Heart** of communications. This is tough in that it requires a good feedback mechanism. Although a simple feedback mechanism, asking a question, is a starter. There are three basic ideas that I incorporate into the **Heart to Heart** of communications and they are:

- Minimizing emotional filters – know that we all have filters and that being able to identify them in the process of communication or by knowing the Who's will minimize the impact
- Getting the information correctly and accurately communicated
- Testing to validate completed communication cycle

What will all this really do for my business?

With these basics of communications fundamentals understood and practiced, you will increase your business functionality and improve relationships. The key element is to ask yourself a few questions like:

- What are my internal communications cycles like?
- Do I understand the language of the various roles I play and do I speak the talk?
- Do I use technology effectively to communicate?
- Whom do I communicate with most and are they influencers?
- What communication inhibitors affect how I interact?
- Do I know how to really *Listen*?
- What do I communicate and what needs to be communicated?
- What more can I do to improve my personal and company communications?

All of us can improve on listening skill and other fundamentals. As you assess these areas you may want to seek a seminar or a even a business coach to assist you. Communications improvement is an interactive process; just reading a book can help, but only to a degree.

So, did you read this out loud? Or did you have someone else read it to you? I had to ask just to see what fun you had with this. Oh, what did you hear when it was read out loud?

Being a Sole Proprietor has many challenges regarding communications as we have briefly discussed. Adding employees to the mix increases the need to improve our skills and even the technology that we can use to promote good communications. So one can only imagine how the complexity of it all increases as we move to a Partnership.

Partnership

For the most part, all the fundamentals that we have discussed in the Sole Proprietorship are the same here and for corporations. The complexity now is that you have more *Influencers* and potentially more *Inhibitors* added to the mix. How your partners and Board of Directors communicate will be strategic in developing operational plans and objectives as well as setting organizational expectations. With the added complexity you will need to hone your communication skills and possibly increase your technology. But more so, it will behoove you to have good processes and procedures defined so that a strong baseline for the fundamentals of information sharing is set.

Are you Communicating?

My experience is that for the most part. We all do a fairly good job of communicating and are even being understood regarding the information that we are communicating. Life is about being able to articulate in the environment that we are in. For a Small or Medium Business, communication is one of the key elements to success. How one is able to present the information regarding their business is critical to marketing and sales. How one listens to feedback from customers, vendors and employees is critical to our products or services meeting market expectations. Being able to show appreciation and say Thank You is critical as a reflection on our integrity.

The essence of it all is: Are we really communicating? I have always found that if there is any one place for improvement in any type of organization, it is in human communications and how it functions in the organization.

Next: Real Life Lessons Learned will discuss Process and Procedures.

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NCDCS, Inc is a consulting company that views business from a holistic approach. We understand that change management affects every aspect of an entities operation and personality such that making a change in a couple areas, technology or process, will affect other areas of the businesses personality. We believe in trusted relationships that influence success in all aspects of your organization.

Please contact us for more information as to how the NCDCS, Inc team can benefit your organization. Visit our web site and engage us in a conversation.

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