When Communication Is Not Enough!

Talking about problems in a responsible and proper manner does not necessarily mean that people are thinking clearly about them. The following report, from one of **BPI**'s expert facilitators, provides some insights on how critical thinking skills can take us to places that even the best communication methods will fail to reach alone.

Communicating Clearly vs. Thinking Clearly

A training company with one of the most effective and popular communication skills programs for parents was in trouble. A friend, who worked for this long-established company, suggested that the President invite us in to consult with them because of our expertise in helping people identify, analyze and resolve problems.

The problem was with disappointing sales of the parent communication program. This was their flagship product, the one that had launched the company. After more than a decade of expansion, sales had hit a plateau and was now flat worldwide for several years. Why?

Good Communication

When we arrived, they executive team agreed to have us observe their meeting as they discussed this high priority issue. I was impressed with the ability of all concerned to communicate; to put into practice what they were teaching to others. A great deal of thinking was shared quickly, with everyone saying what they wanted to say and feeling understood.

As I listened, I made note of several possible causes mentioned by the team, including:

1. Our ads are old and not drawing attention like they did before
2. The market for parent training is drying up
3. Our competition is expanding at our expense
4. The materials were old fashioned and not impressive
5. The independent network of consultants was selling less, being satisfied with their current opportunities to conduct workshops in their local communities.

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I commented on their praiseworthy ability to communicate clearly. (Although they admitted they were on their best behavior because a visitor was observing.) I also mentioned that they had avoided several thinking traps that organizational leaders often stumble into.

- They did not assume they knew the cause of the problem.

- They did not jump to conclusions about what action to take.

- They did not run off doing a series of trial and error actions, wasting resources or making the problem worse.

Good Communication Was Not Good Enough
However, clear talk and inaction had proved not to be a winning strategy either. At the end of 40 minutes the team of eight managers was no closer to understanding how to address their issue than when they had started. They had been discussing this problem on and off in their regular meetings for almost three years now. Seriously, what could I, an outsider, do that these highly skilled communicators had not done in three years of "discussing" this issue? I only had 60 more minutes with them to find out!

Communication Plus Critical Thinking
Normally, I would teach them the necessary thinking method and coach them in applying it. But, time was running out so I opted to act as their facilitator, taking them through the needed steps to complete the **BPI** Problem Solving analysis process and find the true cause of the problem.   The plan: ask questions, visually organize their answers on two easel sheets, and solicit their judgments. They'd supply the facts and judgments – no new information needed. Estimated time = 35 minutes!
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Systematic Description
We quickly sketched the facts about the problem. Questions defining the Problem Area were asked and answered,

creating a clear description of the problem. This took only a few minutes.

Comparisons Generate Possible Causes

Next, I asked for comparisons between the problem area and the non-problem areas. These comparisons came from the experience and knowledge of the management team.

The first purpose of the comparisons was to reveal what is different or unique about the problem area that might help understand why it showed up on just this one product and not their Teacher, Youth, Leader or Women's courses. This encouraged them to develop specific, "high quality" potential causes for the problem. Many of the potential causes mentioned in the earlier part of the meeting were refined and added to the list. But, this process uncovered a new potential cause, one that no one had seriously considered before.

Comparisons Help SCRUB (evaluate) the Potential Causes

The second purpose of the list of comparisons is to evaluate potential causes logically. Each possible cause is assessed based on how well it fits the known facts in the problem description. The potential cause that fits these facts best is the most likely cause; the one we should attempt to verify first. From the list of 10 potential causes they quickly rejected as unlikely all but 2 of them. Those 8 simply did not fit the facts.

The Most Likely Cause

The most likely cause turned out to be the new idea. There was a change the organization made when the manager of the flag ship product retired. Instead of hiring a replacement, the manager of the teacher product was given the parenting product, too. This essentially cut the attention given the parent product by half at best.

Everyone at the meeting agreed that the former manager was very passionate about parent-child communication and gave a great deal of time and energy into spreading the word about it.

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When he left, the manager of the new teacher product was suddenly charged with promoting two products. Given the difference in passion for the one product and the existing workload of the manager of the teacher product, it was not at all surprising that the growth of the parenting product stalled! To verify this hypothesis the executives ordered that data be gathered about time and actions associated with marketing the parenting product before and after the retirement event.

Conclusion

The above analysis took just 30 minutes. It used information already known to the managers. In fact, this information had been available for years! The process narrowed their focus so they could think of a new possibility, one that fit the known facts best. Now they could quickly verify it and then move on to deciding what to do – with a decision based on the reality of the situation not guesswork or politics.

As is often the case, the answer appears obvious after being revealed and verified. But this answer was not discovered before the **BPI** Problem Solving process was applied, despite extensive and highly skilled communication.

Our experience with management assessment centers validates that Communication Skill is not enough all by itself to be an effective manager, supervisor or executive. Both critical thinking and communication skills are integral to effective management and leadership. What is needed is a systematic process to use the facts, harness the judgments and focus thinking.

If you want to solve problems more rapidly and accurately - please **contact** us. **BPI**'s critical-thinking methods foster full engagement using a systematic, organized process that leverages the power of information people already know. Learn more about **BPI**'s practical critical thinking **workshops** now. Sample our concepts by taking one or more of our **self-instructional courses** available through the Troubleshooter Member area of this website. There is no charge to join and **become a member**.