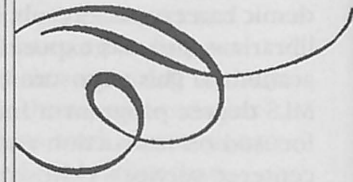


## I HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE: COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

by Mary J. Stanley



The following article is the last in a series written by Mary Stanley. The series, an outcome of her recent sabbatical, focuses on HR issues in libraries.

*Editor*

When I have conducted surveys among staff members in our organization (IUPUI University Library) asking what is the one thing that you would like most to see improved, the answer most often received is communication. Even though we work continuously on improving the networks for communication, this still seems to be one of the greatest concerns among staffers within the organization. We have invited consultants who specialize in the communication issues to address this in the organization as well as providing numerous workshops centered on the topic of communication and yet, this still seems to be an issue in the organization. I do not believe that we are alone in this among libraries.

How often have you heard some of the following comments from members within your organization?

- They aren't telling us everything. I know that they are going to let some of us go.
- They won't listen to me; I am just a peon in the organization.
- I'm the middleman in all of this, and I have no authority.
- Why do I have to tell them they have done a good job? I am not complaining am I?
- They don't need to be burdened with all of the details. I will just tell them the bottom line.

This is just a sampling of some of the conversations that I have heard in my many years of working in libraries. They come from all ranks and all types of individuals, but the message is the same. Something is lacking in the communication among staff members at all levels in the organization.

If you do a literature search on communication, you will find there is a wealth of information out there. The secret is getting individuals to believe and use this

information. Findings from one survey indicate that the majority of workplaces have given increased information to the workforce (Beardwell & Britton, 2003). While this is good news, there is still much to be done in the area of communication in the workplace.

Communication has been called "the lifeblood of a library" (Manley, 1998). What does this mean? In one respect, it means that for a library or any organization to be successful, communication must flow freely through the organization, both upward and downward, allowing all involved to ask and respond to questions and information received. This requires a certain level of trust within the organization as well. Open communication also helps in building morale among the staff and as a result, good performance is visible. Research indicates that employees who are updated frequently feel more motivated to add value (Ingala & Hill, 2001). Tied into this motivation is the clarity of instruction that employees receive. Individuals who receive clear instructions are more apt to be motivated to perform well than those who feel confused about what they are supposed to be doing and the value that it brings to the organization. In most of the research, the communication between the supervisor and employee is key to the success of the individual's performance and ultimately staying with the organization. This puts a great responsibility on the part of the supervisor to learn to communicate in the most appropriate manner with his or her staff. All of the weight should not be placed on the supervisor though. It is also the responsibility of the employee to ask appropriate questions and to ask for clarity if confused by the instructions received. Communication is a two-way street and is the responsibility of all who engage in the process.

Non-formal communication networks such as the grapevine exist in nearly every organization. Employees in one survey rated the grapevine as the second most often used source for information in their organization (Whitworth & Riccomi, 2005). These same employees did rate this source with very low marks for preference and credibility however. How about the grapevine network within your organization? How reliable is the information that is received through this method of

communication? The grapevine isn't merely used to fill the gap created by inefficient formal communication in an organization. It is often a valuable support system and can be helpful in facilitating organizational goals. Despite the predominately negative view of the grapevine often held by management, it does play a role in socializing employees, initiating change, and providing information. Often, the information through the grapevine comes via a work colleague or friend and this aids in the fulfilling of affiliation needs of an employee. Friendship has the tendency to generate a belief in the honesty and integrity of the information being received from that source. One researcher feels that integrating the grapevine within the communication methodologies is useful if not necessary for effective communication within the organization (Nicoll, 1994). He cautions too, that management should not assume that by using this grapevine they do not need to keep employees informed. Official information or knowledge should be imparted in formal communication methods with the grapevine serving as a secondary or supportive source. Employees consider the informal staff "grapevine" a somewhat or very reliable source of information according to a survey conducted by *Communication Briefings*, a newsletter published in Blackwood, NJ. ("Executives evaluate," 1994). Bagin, the newsletter's publisher goes on to say that if employees think that they are not getting the whole story from management, they will seek it from among the resources that they do trust.

While word of mouth is undoubtedly a powerful tool, the grapevine should always remain just one of the many sources that employees can turn to for information. In a survey conducted by Towers Perrin a few years ago, when asked how employees preferred to receive credible information, 86 percent responded that they would prefer hearing it from the supervisor or manager (Thatcher, 2003). Organizations should communicate regularly and honestly with their employees including the bad news with the good. When employees receive clear and reliable information about concerning issues, they are less likely to be involved in the spread of damaging rumors around the organization. As soon as the formal communication courses show distrust, the grapevine tends to bear its sour grapes.

Communication is conducted in several ways. Most often when we hear the word communication, we think of the oral dialogue between at least two individuals. However, communication is also conducted through written or electronic means as well as nonverbal communication. It has been said that 65 percent of communication is done through nonverbal communication. One research contends that 93% of what we communicate to others is through nonverbal communication (Rosenthal, 2006). There are at least three forms

of nonverbal communication: kinesics, paralanguage, and proxemics (Kello, 2007).

Kinesics in communication refers to standing versus sitting, arms folded or open, hands in pockets or hands on hips, facing or turning away, and smiling versus frowning as examples. Cues such as shaking your head in disagreement or nodding in approval to what one hears are both kinesics communication. Eye contact is one of the most powerful kinesics cues used in nonverbal communication. When someone doesn't look us in the eye when we are talking with them, we might think that they are either bored or hiding something from us. On another level, when someone makes strong eye contact (stares), we can feel either threatened or uncomfortable. In some cultures, eye contact is considered rude. Cultural considerations must be taken into account when discussing communication as well.

Paralanguage cues can be the tone and volume of your voice, pausing, laughing, and crying. Think about how we feel when we hear someone's voice over the telephone. A simple hello from an unseen individual can convey a great message by the tone and volume spoken. Tone can convey confidence, encouragement, disinterest, or doubt and is a powerful tool in communication.

Proxemics is the use of space and distance in communication. In western culture, one-on-one dialogue takes place at approximately two feet from one another (Kello, 2007). Any closer and you are considered invading one's space. Any further away and you might appear as distant or not connected to the discussion. At the organization level, when a supervisor stays behind the desk in communication sessions, a barrier is set between the supervisor and the employee. Unless showing authority, such as in a discipline transaction, the supervisor may want to move from behind the desk and sit with the employee at a table. Nonverbal communication occurs whether or not a person realizes it.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where someone misinterpreted your actions or nonverbal communication? This type of misunderstanding is common in the workplace, but it does not have to become major problems. You just need to know how to identify, acknowledge, and resolve them. Whether you are dealing with a misconception held by your supervisor or co-worker, it is best to act upon this misconception privately. Sharing your concerns this way will help prevent the issue from expanding and creating additional challenges. Try to stay calm and objective as emotionally charged reactions will do more harm than good. As an example, colleagues may mistakenly think that you do not wish to have contact with them because you unconsciously sigh whenever they interrupt your work. You may be unintentionally

developing a pattern that is sending the wrong message at work. Image problems need to be addressed but be cautious about becoming overly concerned with them, especially those that are largely unsubstantiated.

In today's workplace, one of the most common methods of communication that is being used is e-mail. Electronic communication has become the main avenue for communication that was at one time done either face-to-face or over the telephone. While this electronic means of communicating has saved an enormous amount of time, it also has its drawbacks. The main one is the loss of the nonverbal communication cues. This new mode of communication allows for instantaneous communication with anyone who is online. In 1998, 3.4 trillion e-mail messages were exchanged in the United States (Sloboda, 1999). This translates into over 12,000 e-mails for every individual. That was nearly a decade ago. Can you imagine what the figures would reveal today? With this explosion of communication, it would be very easy to make mistakes or violate the 'netiquette' of the electronic world. Emotions that we convey in face-to-face conversation are not as easily conveyed in the electronic format. And many times, what we write and send off immediately might be perceived in a totally different tone and manner than we intended. One "emotion" typically conveyed in e-mail is use of "all caps" which in electronic communication sends a very negative message as if one were yelling. Once you have hit that send button, it is very difficult to retrieve your message without the receiver knowing that you sent it.

Another typical mistake in electronic communication is the matter of "jokes" or "chain mail." It is not necessary to forward every one of these messages that you receive. On that same note, pictures sent might fall into this category as well. These types of messages take space on the computer network and can often overload one's mailbox. Also remember that when you forward or send something, your name is attached to it forever. You have no control over who will be the next person to receive it after it has left your computer. You should never send something that could bring you regrets later.

Similar to the e-mail method of communication are chat rooms. Chat rooms are designed to allow interested participants to have real-time discussions via the computer. While this is a most intriguing form of communication, be careful what message that you send to a group. You want to ensure your credibility, and you would not want something inflammatory or incorrect connected to your name. Chat Reference provides a new way for libraries to interact with their clients. Words such as "thanks" aid in building trust between two people engaged in a remote but serious interaction. Positive opening and closing rituals also

express courtesy or respect for the engaged client. Clarity is especially important in these types of interactions as the library is doing a service that is normally done in a face-to-face situation. It is important to understand what the client needs and be able to translate the information found in a manner that the client will understand as well.

Listservs are another popular method of communication especially in libraries. A listserv is an automated e-mail system that is organized by subject matter. When one person sends a message, it is routed to the e-mail addresses of all the other subscribers to that particular listserv. Many of these are moderated to protect people from flame wars and messages that are off topic. Typical listservs for libraries include reference, instruction, circulation, interlibrary loan, and technical services types.

Effective communication also includes active listening. Real communication is two-way with information, reactions, and feedback flowing in both directions. Listening is not waiting for your turn to talk. It is taking time to really hear what the other individual is saying. Ask questions to gain a good understanding of what is being said. Make a conscious effort to really listen and block out distracting thoughts. Focus your total attention on the speaker and pause before responding to carefully consider their comments or statements. Paraphrase or restate the main points in your own words to demonstrate that you have heard what they have said and to ensure that you have correctly understood their statements. If you need clarification, ask questions in a non-threatening manner and stay emotionally unattached. Emotions can trigger a non-objective viewpoint which you want to avoid.

Too often when we engaged in conversation, we are busily thinking of our response to an individual rather than really listening to what they have to say. We are so focused on our own answer that we haven't heard the message that is being said by the other participant. This happens often in reference interviews as well. We don't take the time to really listen and hear what our clients are asking. Instead, our mind is busily thinking of which source, database, etc., might fulfill their needs according to what we first heard them say. That may account for some of the low ratings librarians have received from their clients when asked if the library provided what they needed. It is a challenge to learn to actively listen, but it is something that we need to really attempt to do if want to successfully interact with clients.

Another consideration in communication is the culture of the individuals involved. Different cultures like to receive information in different ways (Ribbink, 2002). Unfortunately, most of us judge other cultures by our own standards of what is right or wrong,

appropriate or inappropriate. The likelihood of misunderstanding is much higher in a workforce that is multicultural. Just because someone can speak English doesn't mean that the cultural differences are removed. An example would be in today's world, much of our communication in the workplace is done through e-mail. Cultures like those found in Latin America, South Europe and the Middle East are more likely to recognize the importance of decisions or urgency of communication when they receive it face-to-face (Tokarek, 2006). As noted earlier in the section on nonverbal communication, gestures, eye contact, and many other modes of communication mean different things to individuals depending on their culture and background. It is easy to misinterpret or misunderstand the meaning of the communication because of these barriers. It is especially important to be cognizant of these differences in libraries as many of our clients may be from a different culture, and we would not want to offend them by our actions or words.

How do you handle or avoid embarrassing situations? Keep your communication clear and simple, and avoid using slang or jargons. Ask and encourage questions throughout the interaction. Use open-ended questions and watch for nonverbal communication cues. Respect cross-cultural rules and taboos, such as those regarding personal space. For instance, do not touch or tap individuals on the shoulder, back, arms, or lap, or sit or stand too close to them. Paraphrase to make sure that you have understood. Be open-minded, patient, and flexible. As you grow more sensitive to the varied backgrounds and the communication differences that exist, you will learn to appreciate their norms and the values of different cultures. Many of the pitfalls of misunderstanding and cultural confusion can be prevented with early and ongoing training.

Another barrier to effective communication that is often neglected or misunderstood is the differences in gender communication. In one study on gender communication, women expressed concerns regarding feeling ignored and having a difficult time making their opinions heard in the workplace (Hale, 1999). Men expressed a lack of trust with women and a sense of competitiveness. Women in the study also noted that they were more likely to be interrupted during discussions than were the men. One great difference that is indicated in much of the research stems around humor in the workplace. The differences in how men and women sometimes interpret humor can affect how each chooses to exert power at work. Rapport is significantly more important to women and helps establish their base of power and influence (Weinstein, 2006). For men, the sense of hierarchy and status is more important while women seem more comfortable in flattening out the organization. Studies also show that women are more likely to change the topic of conversation when a

male co-worker joins them to make him feel part of the group. Connie Glaser (2007), author of the book, *GenderTalk Works (If you do it right): 7 Steps for Cracking the Gender Code at Work*, suggests that organizations should plan programs where gender issues can be discussed to minimize conflict and misunderstandings from these gender differences. This emphasis on gender communication is not new. The book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* by John Gray, whose topic was improving communication between the genders, became a bestseller over a decade ago. An understanding that these differences exist and a willingness to learn and appreciate these differences will go a long way in improving workplace relations and establishing a congenial work environment.

Meetings in the workplace are another example of a powerful communication tool. A critical challenge for organizations is to find ways to make meetings more productive and useful for those who attend them. Below is a list of common complaints about the organizational meeting:

- Meetings are boring
- They are a waste of time
- Many are poorly organized, unstructured and chaotic
- They last too long
- We have them too often, or we don't have enough of them
- Nothing is ever decided in meetings
- People aren't asked for input and no one will speak up

Do these sound familiar? Unfortunately, I know that I have heard all of these at one time or another when individuals discuss their workplace meetings. How do we circumvent this from happening? Successful meetings don't just happen. They are the result of careful planning and effective facilitation.

There are basically two types of workplace meetings. One type is help do inform the participants regarding work-related matters. Content includes announcements, updates, and reports. Participants are expected to listen and understand, and to ask questions if they don't. The second type of meeting is held to reach a conclusion on agenda topics. The conclusion may be a solution to a problem or the details of a new activity. Here, participants are expected to understand the issues, evaluate the suggestions, and then participate in the choice of one of these. Other terms to identify these meetings are an information sharing meeting and a decision making meeting.

One of the most common causes for a meeting to fail to produce desired results and waste participants' time is the lack of time spent by the convener on

planning. Successful meetings are planned in detail and in advance. Background materials are provided to attendees in advance so that they can be prepared for discussion. A detailed agenda with location and time is distributed before the meeting. All agenda items should be given a specified time for discussion, and the facilitator should ensure that these timelines are kept. All meetings should begin and end on time.

The most effective means to achieve desired meeting behavior is accomplished by setting ground rules that govern meeting conduct as well as meeting management and should be created and agreed upon by the participants.

The meeting should not end until decisions have been documented and individuals identified to be responsible for action items. A review of these items should be discussed before the meeting ends. This will also ensure that understanding and clarity of the decisions has been reached by the participants. If minutes are part of an organization's meeting process, they should be distributed as soon as possible after the meeting ends. Some organizations do a plus/delta (a simple way to get feedback by encouraging everyone to consider what went well, the pluses, and what should be improved, the deltas) at the end of their meeting to evaluate its success. This provides a means for improvement for ensuing meetings.

Summing it up, the communications loop consists of four parts: sender, message, receiver, and feedback. The sender issues the message in an attempt to pass along, impart, or transmit information. The message may consist of words, expressions, or gestures, or a combination of the three. The receiver is the audience to whom the message is directed. To make the loop complete, the receiver provides feedback or acknowledgement to the sender. To communicate effectively, the sender's message must mean the same thing to the receiver as it does to the sender. When a breakdown occurs, communication doesn't work as well as anticipated.

Developing effective communication skills helps an organization achieve its goals as all organizations depend on communication to survive. It is worth the effort to work on establishing these skills within the workplace. Communication builds relations, allows cooperation and generally fosters a pleasant working environment. The quality of communication in the workplace contributes to the level of employee commitment.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Stanley will be retiring in November 2008 from her position as associate dean of the IUPUI University Library. She has been with University Library since 1986 and her major responsibilities include being director of Human Resources. She is certified as a Birkman Consultant and a trainer for the Franklin Covey Company. One of her major accomplishments is her book, *Managing Library Employees*, published by Neal-Schuman Publishers in 2008. She has served as chair of the Social Work Librarian's Interest Group, a national organization affiliated with the Council on

Social Work Education. She was instrumental in the formation of the Human Resources section of the Indiana Library Federation and has served as chair of the group. Mary has taught for the IU School of Library and Information Science and the IUPUI School of Liberal Arts.



This article focuses primarily on grant opportunities for libraries. Preparing the grant, knowing what questions to ask, and making sure the application is prepared. Issues also include a number of funding sources and their relevance to research for grants, including National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

This article reviews the unique challenges and advantages that academic librarians have over public libraries in terms of fundraising. It includes examples of working within the campus structure, defining the evolving academic library and includes information on other relevant or related to fundraising.

This article covers both the costs of various state libraries as well as a review of libraries in funding funds in high-tech. The article also provides specific funding ideas for both public and academic libraries to further proposed projects.

This article describes the "Booker, Davis & Johnson" campaign for the State Public Library entrance to raise funds for a capital campaign. The author describes what worked - and what didn't - in terms of various aspects of the campaign from letters to door-to-door canvassing and the success that the campaign enjoyed.

This book covers a range of topics, particularly geared towards friends groups, including membership, campaign, advocacy, and compiling over 100 tried and tested fundraising ideas called from statewide friends groups. The guide also contains forms, letters, and graphics for use.

This article (2002) fundraising for libraries 25 years later to see how many for your library. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers.