Why Should Anyone Listen to YOU?
Leading the Way to Good Communication

By Dr. Jim Dyke

Here's the good news for managers and supervisors who want good communication on the job—you hold the keys to unlock the best practices in your team members!

Why? Because good communication is entirely a function of EQ—emotional intelligence—and Daniel Goleman reminds us that the EQ of a leader or manager travels through their organization like "electricity through wires" (his words, not mine).[1]

So… get busy and start leading your team to better communication and superior performance. Use these three powerful phrases to guide you…

> **Build Trust**
> **Show Respect**
> **Cultivate People**

Build Trust

In a survey of over 15,000 people, which of these traits do you think was selected as the key to effective leadership?

> Fair-mindedness?
> Cooperation?
> Honesty?
> Imagination?

 "Being honest" scored far above all the others in a list of 20 key traits.[2] Honesty is central to credibility, and credibility is at the heart of successful leadership. How do you build high credibility with your team, so they will trust you enough to communicate with openness and honesty? Here are some practical suggestions:

▶ **Tell the truth.** Don't hedge on the facts. Be prepared to answer tough questions. Keep in mind, "I don't know" is an appropriate response *if it's true.*

▶ **Share information.** Keep your team well-informed. Use short, frequent meetings to keep the flow of information current.

▶ **Don't blindside them about—*anything*.** You don't like surprises? Neither do they. This is where frequency of communication will help.

▶ **Keep your promises.** Follow through on your commitments. Do what you say you will do.

▶ **Act consistently.** Match behavior with values— "Do what I say, not what I do" doesn't cut it here. If you preach teamwork, do you work well with others? If you demand loyalty, do you give it? Make sure you're not sending mixed messages to your people.

▶ **Drop the act.** Acknowledge your mistakes. Admit your doubts and questions. Don't try to "snow" the very people who are most likely to spot a fake front. If you model openness, they will follow suit.

▶ **Become a learner.** Show your team that it's okay not to have all the answers, *if they are willing to do the hard work of research and learning.* In the new climate of business, no one will have a lock on knowledge. There is too much change going on, and too much information to master. What's a person to do? *Learn how to learn.* You can help your team by showing them how: how to listen, collaborate, research, and *think*.

▶ **Trust *them*.** Take them at their word. Communicate your confidence in their strengths, skills, and experience. Give them challenging assignments, with as much freedom to do the job as they can handle. Don't micro-manage—it is demoralizing to the vast majority of workers.

Show Respect

We all have those famous lyrics in our heads and our hearts: R-E-S-P-E-C-T. You know it's true—*we don't follow leaders we don't respect.* And we certainly don't respect people who don't respect *us.* Respect is central to good communication—if people feel that you respect them, they will be willing to talk to you. Even more, they will be willing to tell you *the truth*. More important, they will care enough to hear what *you* have to say. Here's how to tap into this powerful motivator…

▶ **Use the Magic Words.** We learned them as kids at the dinner table, and they still matter in social discourse: "Please" and "Thank You". Use them liberally and often—as bookends in your work assignments, they turn demands into respect-filled requests: "Could you please take some time and review these figures for me? I will really appreciate it. Thank you!"

▶ **Treat your team members like valued customers.** What is your greatest resource, as a manager or supervisor? ANSWER: Your people—your team. Make this principle a reality with three simple leadership priorities:

(1) Make sure your people have everything they need to succeed in their jobs (that's called "carrying water" for you team!)

(2) Run interference for them by removing obstacles and solving problems that impair their ability to do their work easily and effectively

(3) Don't forget that *every person is an expert in their own 25 square feet of space.* So, listen and learn from *your* experts. They will tell you what they see; what they know; what they need; and how you can help.

Now take this to the next level:

▶ **Ask for their ideas and their input.** This not only shows respect for your team members, it is the best way to leverage their knowledge, skill, experience, and perspective.

▶ **Involve them in decision-making.** Just make sure they understand where and how they are involved. "Consensus" means they are going to have a say in the actual decision. "Collaboration" means they are going to have input, but they are not going to necessarily have the final "say." Be sure they know the difference at the outset.

▶ **Don't patronize or talk down to others.** In conversation, talk to your team members as you would to someone you deeply respect. How carefully would you choose your words, if you were speaking to the President of the United States? Exercise the same care with your own people.

▶ **Use *engaging requests* instead of *confrontational accusations*.**

NOT THIS: What on earth were you thinking? THIS: Help me understand your rationale for this approach. NOT THIS: Why isn't that project done? THIS: Can you give me a progress report on that project? NOT THIS: If you don't succeed, you're going to make all of us look bad. THIS: We're in this together, so how can I help?

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▶ **Be a good listener.** This deserves a separate treatment of its own, but here are some quick pointers to put into practice immediately:

- *Pay close attention*—listen carefully and look the speaker in the eye.

- If you feel the need, take notes—it reinforces the value you are placing on the conversation.

- Give verbal and non-verbal clues that you are attentive and engaged. Nod your head; use words and phrases like: *Yes… I see… Uh huh…*

- Don't interrupt, especially to defend yourself. Let them finish.

- Allow them to "vent" emotionally, if they need to. But…

- Exercise emotional control. Don't explode, or "blow up" in response to *their* emotional state.

- Ask clarifying questions, to be sure you understand.

- Ask them for their input: *How could we make this better? How could we do a better job of handling this?*

- Validate their feelings. Don't try to convince them that they "shouldn't feel that way." That is patronizing. Say this instead: *I think if I were in your shoes, I would probably feel the same way.*

Cultivate People

Here's the simple truth: better *communication* comes from better *people.* That means a manager or supervisor can improve communication in the workplace by helping team members grow, develop, and acquire better skills. Here are some pointers:

▶ **Establish an *Open Door PLUS* policy.** Give your people access—your time and your attention—*but you take the initiative*. Get out of your office to "chat" with team members on their own turf and deliver information to them *personally*, not just through e-mails or memos.

▶ **Schedule individual time with each team member.** Lunches can be a good time for this. Don't talk. Listen. Get to know them better as individuals. Yes, use the time to learn more about their personal interests, goals, family, and hobbies. But make it a point to learn about their strengths and weaknesses as workers; their workstyle on the job; their concerns and frustrations in the organization; and their own professional goals. Find out what motivates them, and *how best to motivate them in the workplace.* This will help you to…

▶ **Promote their interests and goals.** People love to work for a boss who helps them move forward in their career. If you become that kind of boss, the best people in the organization will be asking to work with *you.*

▶ **Never punish failure.** Create an atmosphere of appropriate risk-taking where a certain amount and level of failure is understood as an expected part of an innovative, learning organization.

▶ **Give loyalty and support.** Never throw your team members under the bus. Back your people as their most loyal supporter. Remember: if you are their leader, then their failure is ultimately *your* responsibility.

▶ **Pour on the praise, affirmation, and appreciation.** You can't do this too much. Give credit to your team. Do it in private, and do it in public. And do it individually, on the fly—as you see your people performing well in day-to-day responsibilities. (Ken Blanchard calls this "catching people doing something right.") Brag on your team to your boss (it always reflects well on you, too!)

▶ **Become a coach.** When you have to address performance issues, set aside *individual* time with the offending team member and do it right—put the emphasis on *correction* not *criticism.* Help your team member understand how their performance contributes to the critical purpose and success of the organization. Be specific about the changes you want to see in actions, behavior, standards, or attitudes. Make sure they have the resources they need to improve. Connect the change process with what really motivates them (e.g. Appreciation? Achievement? Challenge? Recognition? Status?)

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Conclusion

If you become a manager who builds trust; shows respect; and cultivates people; you will create an environment of openness and collaboration that will not only foster good communication—*it will also make you a person that people really want to listen to.*

References

[1] *Primal Leadership,* by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Harvard Business Review*, December, 2001, Vol. 79 Issue 11, p42.

[2] *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It,* by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, San Francisco.