

3 Ways Leaders Can Improve Their Communication In 2021

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28th January 2021

Over the last year, the UK government has been accused of sending mixed messages about the Covid-19 pandemic. Christmas was on, and then it was off. In early January, parents were told to 'absolutely' send their children to school before directing schools to close the next day. Now, vaccine efficacy is in the headlines due to the government's decision to delay the second Covid-19 vaccine from three to 12 weeks. Difficult times lead to difficult decisions. Rapidly shifting situations often mean communicating a hard decision today, which could be right or wrong tomorrow.

It's not just the UK government that is struggling. Business leaders have to deliver difficult news that will affect people's lives. After a draining year, it can be hard to communicate in a way that doesn't cause annoyance or distress. But it doesn't have to be that way. Whether addressing the nation or tackling a problem in the workplace, leaders can use some simple communication techniques to build rapport, diffuse workplace conflict, and smooth the way for a mutually successful outcome.

1. Look at the perspective of the recipient

Often, the way we frame the start of the communication will impact how it unfolds. The key to this is to see it from the audience's perspective to understand how the message might come across. How may they feel? What might be their reaction? Then reflect this in the message, for example, 'I need to say something that might be difficult to hear.' This both prepares the audience for what's to come and also demonstrates that an effort has been made to see things from their point of view.

Make it clear that this is a two-way conversation. For example, instead of saying, 'I want to talk to you about what you said,' try 'I want to speak with you one-to-one to hear your views and to share mine.' Also, avoid blaming the other person. 'You really upset me by what you said' could imply it was a deliberate action on their part, likely to trigger a defensive reaction. 'I am not sure if you are aware of this, but I was upset by something you said last week,' is more open and leaves room for a discussion that could reveal a misunderstanding rather than negative intent.

2. Consider the language

Simple adjustments to wording can also make a big difference to a potentially difficult conversation, according to research by Elizabeth Stokoe, professor of social interaction at Loughborough University. In one study, Stokoe listened to thousands of hours of recorded calls to and from a mediation service to understand why so many callers were resisting

mediation as an informal route to resolve their conflicts. She discovered that one word was compelling in getting parties to the table: willing. 'Would you be willing to...' got a much more positive outcome than 'Would you like to...' or 'Would you be interested in...'. Using the word 'willing' allows the other person to feel prepared to try something and come across as someone who is reasonable.

Conversation analysts have discovered other words that can be impactful. US researchers John Heritage and Jeffrey Robinson found that patients hesitated to voice all their concerns at doctors' appointments, often resulting in the need for a second visit. The researchers studied the difference between doctors asking, 'Is there anything else I can help you with today?' and 'Is there something else I can help you with today?' They found that when they used the word 'anything,' 53% of patients raised another concern. However, when they used the word 'something,' this increased to 90% of patients raising another concern. This shows that the choice of words really does matter.

3. Spot patterns and flags

It's always worth taking time to explore what people are saying, as it often leads to a deeper understanding and a better outcome. For example, if an employee repeatedly talks about not receiving an apology, this is a flag to dig further. It may be tempting to think that they just want to hear the word 'sorry,' but don't assume that this word will solve everything. Some people are looking for empathy, others want to feel heard or are requesting you to take responsibility for your actions. It's only by digging beneath the surface, and increasing mutual understanding, that you will discover the underlying needs on both sides and how best to meet them.

Whether it's a national announcement or an important interpersonal conversation, actively thinking about the audience's perspective, choosing your language carefully, and detecting 'conversation flags' is the key to the best outcome. There will likely be further challenges and government policy reversals in the coming months. Orwell wrote: 'If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.' In these tumultuous times, it is more important than ever for government and leaders to consider the impact and repercussions of how and what they communicate.