

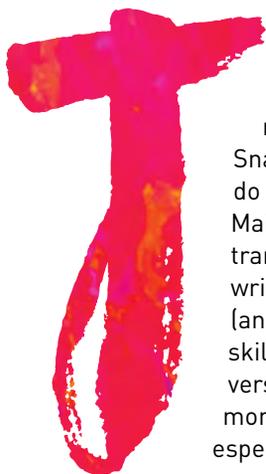
The Medium, the Message and the Audience

Preparing for a meeting or presentation is commonplace, but have you prepared for the audience? This is an important aspect of workplace communications



Amanda James, COO of McLuhan & Davies

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Texting, Tweeting, instant messaging, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp — what do they have in common? Mainly they represent a transition from long-form written communication (and communication skills) to a more shorthand version that is increasingly more accepted, and used, especially as millennials permeate the workplace. But

communicating, whether it's via device, at a presentation or during a lunch-n-learn, can be daunting and stressful. McLuhan & Davies offers solutions for business communication and helps people to "think, write, speak and lead." *Your Workplace* magazine spoke with Amanda James, chief operating officer with McLuhan & Davies, about their communication research and how process and communication training is even more important in today's modern workplace.



Your Workplace: What are the biggest communications challenges facing HR or other management in the workplace?

James: One of the biggest challenges is a breakdown in communication due to varying communication styles. This is partly a generational issue, but it's not the whole story. Our research shows that when we communicate, we do so in one of three distinct styles. If we don't recognize our own dominant style, or that of the person we're communicating with, that's a recipe for communication breakdown.

As an example, baby boomers tend to be more analytical communicators and value the written word, structure and time to process communication. Millennials tend to be more visual communicators and thrive in spontaneous environments. There are certainly exceptions to this, but in general we find it to be true. This can lead to communication breakdown at all levels: interpersonal, departmental and organizational.

With the knowledge that different people (and generations) communicate differently, what are the next steps in bridging those gaps?

The first step is to recognize that people communicate in different ways. Our research identified three styles of communication, which we call think, relate and leap. But more generally we say someone is a more analytical communicator someone is a more interactive communicator and someone is more visual communicator.

Those who associate themselves under the "think" category value structure, number sequence and logic; they prefer time to process communication. Those who assign themselves to the "leap" category enjoy variety, change and use their time instantaneously; they thrive in high-stake, spontaneous environments. Finally, those who fall under the "relate" category value relationships, consensus

and flexibility; they ask questions and seek opinions from others.

According to our research, Roger Davies, our CEO, found that a person can have one dominating trait or combined traits of three distinct communication styles. Once you understand this, it's merely a matter of knowing your own dominant communication style, knowing those of others and learning how to effectively link the two for productive communication.

For example, a visual communicator may ask a question to an analytical communicator and expect an immediate response (because visual communicators themselves tend to respond very quickly). But an analytical communicator generally prefers time to reflect. So you can see how this can break down. But if the visual communicator recognized that they were talking to an analytical communicator, they could adjust accordingly.

How difficult is it to adapt to other people's communication styles?

It's not difficult. It's a communication skill that can be learned, and it starts with first knowing your own style then learning to recognize those of others. Once that's in place, there are ways to bridge that gap. Awareness is the key first step.

It's actually a fairly simple fix to some complex-seeming problems. Often people may think they are having a personality conflict with someone, but it just might be they have different communication styles. It's like showing up to a tennis match with a squash racquet and expecting to have a good game.

Are there other communications challenges facing organizations?

Yes. It's actually hard to think of any challenge in an organization that couldn't be improved by better

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communication. One of the biggest challenges we see is that organizations are changing faster than ever. Communication plays a key, if not the key, role in how effectively or not that change is managed. Unclear and poorly structured messages from leadership can create uncertainty and fear among employees. That can lead to stress, poor moral, higher turnover and a host of other issues.

Conversely, when a leader can articulate a message and plan clearly, it helps everyone. This is particularly important when leaders need to respond on the spot, with little or no time to prepare when addressing difficult organizational issues.

Again, these are skills that can be learned. We can offer three pointers. The first is simple but often neglected: Think before you speak. It gives you time to collect your thoughts and avoid a potentially rambling, emotional response. Next, think structure. How can you best position those ideas for the listener? And third, think threes. Choosing three main points goes a long way to help the audience follow and remember the message.

How does technology either help or hinder employees with communication?

Technology definitely helps provide quick and immediate communication. It helps break down barriers: for

example, platforms like Zoom and Skype create a collective way to work remotely. Clients are asking for more ways they can connect and bring employees from many offices into one place. The world is becoming borderless. Technology allows for more listening because meetings are easily recorded and people do not have to take notes. It's all more measurable and trackable.

In terms of hindering I think the immediacy goes both ways. It comes back to the original point around communication styles, and there's often an expectation that an email should get a response right away. And with pressure to respond immediately, are people taking the time to put in "the right information? Will the tone be misinterpreted? We've all heard of disaster stories from clicking send too fast.

And these constantly beeping devices can be a never-ending distraction. We're communicating more than ever, but perhaps in a less effective way. Some employees don't even talk anymore. They email and text only. We believe in an integrated approach to communication that incorporates all forms of communicating.

Are things like AI or virtual reality changing communication in the workplace?

It's still very much at the beginning. We have launched virtual reality as a practice tool for presentation skills. It's disrupting things in a positive way and making it more interactive. People use VR in a safe environment and practice a short presentation and get measurable feedback they wouldn't normally get — their voice, hand gestures, eye contact, how they move within the crowd and more. I don't, however, think technology should be the only way to teach communications. It's augmenting communications teaching, it's improving it but it's not replacing it. It is disrupting in a positive way and gives you that experience of being in front of an audience.

What skills should HR managers incorporate to make communications better in their workplaces?

Fostering an environment where employees have an awareness of communication styles is important, for interpersonal communication and at the organizational level as well. Also, learning to use structured communication techniques will help HR managers provide on-demand feedback to employees, help structure their message and get buy-in from different departments. Listening skills — this is also critical.

Does the format of communication (speech, presentation, meeting) change the way communications should be taught?

The building blocks are the same when preparing your message for different audiences. So, if you are preparing for a speech, for example, or a conference call or a team meeting — taking a step back and thinking about the audience, what message you are trying to deliver and how you want to deliver it, the building blocks are the same. Then how to deliver the message in terms of the medium will change. Should you use visuals? Do you have people who benefit from a follow-up handout? Should you have a question-and-answer engagement? It's important to adapt depending on the audience and medium you're employing.

How difficult is it to adapt to an audience?

Like anything, it's a skill that can be learned and improves with practice. There is an opportunity to have a more effective outcome if you are thinking first about who will be in the room and what their needs are. It is important to put yourself in the shoes of people who are receiving the information. This is the basis for the best presentation. Know your audience. 

