

PUBLIC RELATIONS TACTICS

Communicating Better With Your Boss

By Merna Skinner

Getting along with your boss can be a challenge. One way to foster a good relationship is to understand his or her preferred communication style. With this information, you will better understand what motivates your boss and how he or she is most comfortable receiving and processing information.

To improve communication, the first step is to identify your own personal communication type. Once equipped with this information, you can then recognize how you and your boss are alike or different in terms of communication needs.

Most people fall into four common communicator types. Understanding what motivates them and how they make decisions will help you improve communication effectiveness. Your overall goal is to give them information in a way that is both familiar and comfortable. Here's a description of the types: Define your boss—then get some practical advice on how best to communicate.

The Director

The Director has a short attention span, processes information quickly, and is most interested in "the bottom line." It is best to come to her with a bulleted list of conclusions and action that needs to be taken. You will quickly lose her if you burden her with unnecessary background information. For example, for written reports, she

will react best to a succinct and action-oriented executive summary. Including support documentation is fine, but "more is not always better" for the Director. She tends to guard her time, so always thoroughly prepare before you speak with her. Expect interruptions. Plan to start precisely on time and possibly end early.

The Director demands self-confidence and an ability to think and act quickly. This often translates into her need to "have all the answers" and "always be right." In approaching the Director with alternative solutions, it is best to fully acknowledge her solution and ask permission to present another point of view. Be sure to present your solution concisely, with a well-conceived action plan. Rather than spending precious time critiquing her plan, focus on clearly communicating the benefits and value of yours.

The Free Spirit

If your boss is a Free Spirit, you will have to learn to be patient. He is typically a creative, "big picture" kind of person who thrives on options but is not always strong on follow-through. His attitude toward time limitations or structure is relaxed, so you should be prepared for lots of changes in direction along the way. Give him enough time to assimilate what you have said, think about it and respect his

need to consider lots of alternatives before making a decision. A Free Spirit often needs to have you diplomatically ground his ideas in the reality of timetables and budgets. You should also be prepared to discuss lots of topics at once without necessarily finishing one thoroughly. Help the Free Spirit put a structure to these ideas. Plan to start late and end late.

Free Spirits usually have a visual orientation and don't necessarily perceive things in a



Is your boss like Mr. Burns on
"The Simpsons?"

linear or methodical manner. When working on projects with a Free Spirit, you need to generate enthusiasm. Describe projects in language that is lively, upbeat and enthusiastic. By focusing initially on the excitement of the final product you will get his buy-in to do the actual work. In addition, you'll need two deadlines: the real one (which you control) and the looser one (which gives enough independence to try different approaches before committing to the final one).

The Humanist

For the Humanist to be happy, everyone else has to be happy too. She is very concerned with the feelings of others and always wants to be sure that their needs are thoroughly met. Anything you present to the Humanist should already have been passed around the entire department for full consensus. Working with a Humanist has its benefits—she genuinely cares about your welfare and that of your fellow workers—however, she sets a very high standard regarding respectful behavior. The Humanist is uncomfortable with change and slow to alter past ways of doing things. Communicating with her requires patience and tact. Plan to spend more than your allotted time discussing issues.

Because Humanists are often tentative and unsure of themselves, you need to ask lots of open-ended

questions to ascertain their needs. Working with them on a project demands patience and an even pace. It is best to divide project tasks into a series of smaller, defined steps, which they can comfortably complete. Humanists love tests, pilots and small sample sizes as ways of gaining enough valid results before making larger business decisions and commitments.

The Historian

The Historian thrives on detail and reacts best to structure and precision. He respects people who always provide them with thorough analyses and background information. He tends to process information in a linear and methodical way and does not like to jump from subject to subject. Very often he will tend to micromanage, focusing on details and process more than strategy, ideas or concepts. It is always important to discuss things in an orderly and step-by-step fashion. Because he is analytical he needs to know the whole story. Plan to arrive on time and remain patient.

Individuals involved in numerical detail are often Historians. Because they need time to assimilate data, it is best to give them reports or written material before meetings. At the actual meeting, present findings in an easily comprehended format. Historians expect meeting agendas and recommendations that can

be fully supported with hard data. If you don't know the answer to his questions, admit it and agree upon a date by which you will get back to him. Don't try to fake it—it will only decrease your credibility. ■



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