

WIN 5.1 - Open Communication

Lesson 2 - Communication Pitfalls

Narrator:

Your communication style is as unique as a fingerprint. It allows you to express who you are, understand the world around you, and help the world understand you. In our professional lives, communication allows us to exchange information and ideas; collaborate, negotiate, motivate, lead, and follow.

But the communication process is far from perfect. All too often it falls short - causes misunderstandings. Why? According to cross-cultural management expert Dr. Nancy J. Adler, the answer lies in the nature of communication itself.

It's impossible to express exactly what we are thinking and feeling to another person. Once a thought leaves our brains, the words we choose, our tone of voice, our facial expression, and gestures—all symbols of our original thought—influence the way it's received by someone else. In return, the response we hear back is merely a symbol of the other person's original thought.

Now add culture into the mix. A different understanding of language, tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures. The chances of the other person interpreting your symbolic message as you intended it—and of you interpreting theirs—drops even lower.

This stems from the idea that each of us has a one-of-a-kind communication style. In her book "Dance of Opinions," Sherwood Fleming explains that our approach to communication is formed through our experiences with our families, cultures, education, professions, and our own innate characteristics. These influences lead us to perceive the world in a particular way. They can also be a source of miscommunication.

Our ability to perceive is an important tool. Once we receive new information from a person or event outside of us, we filter it through our perceptions. Perception is the process we use in order to select, organize and evaluate information. But this process is far from perfect. Perception is selective - learned and culturally determined, and tends to remain constant. In fact, perceptions can be difficult to change.

Take stereotypes, for example. A form of perception, they guide our behaviour towards different groups - for instance, different ethnic or national groups. But when stereotypes stay the same, even in the face of new information, they can lead to false assumptions about our own culture, and the culture of others.

According to Dr. Adler, studies show that effective international managers—those who deal successfully with team members from a variety of cultures—understand the pitfalls of the communication process. And they incorporate this knowledge into their management style.

Effective international managers accept that they don't know everything. They observe what's being said and done, but try not to interpret or evaluate it. And when evaluation is needed, they try to see the situation through the eyes of the other person. They also treat their evaluations as guesses or hypotheses that need to be checked out with others - not as certainties. And they always try to stand back from themselves and remain objective.

Now let's take a look at how these qualities can be used in a practical sense. Let's conduct an interview with an internationally-educated health professional.

Joan:

Nice to meet you. I'm Joan Selkirk, the Nurse Manager.

Amisi:

It's a pleasure to meet you, Joan. I'm Amisi Santos.

Joan:

Why don't you follow me to the office.