WHAT IS A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO COMMUNICATING AT WORK?

The title of this book hints at an important assumption that we will emphasize throughout the chapters: Simply communicating is an insufficient, and sometimes even unnecessary, condition for accomplishing your goals at work; you must be a strategic communicator. Let’s explore this thought in greater depth.

Although communication is important, merely communicating without an objective in mind and without an appropriate strategy for accomplishing your objective can actually be harmful to your ability to work well with others. In addition, part of being a strategic communicator involves knowing when not to com- municate. In their book, Organizational Communication for Survival, communication researchers and authors Richmond, McCroskey, and Powell laid out a series of myths and misconceptions about commu- nication—including “communication will solve all our problems,” “the more communication, the better,” and “communication is a good thing.” Instead, they argue that communication does solve problems, but it also creates them; the quality of communication is far more important than the amount of it.

In addition, communication is neither a good nor a bad thing; it is a tool that must be used effectively to achieve desirable outcomes. Ineffective communicators can misuse this tool just like people who have never had a golf lesson can misuse a set of golf clubs and end up in sand traps, water hazards, and out of bounds. Strategic communication is the foundation for using communication in positive ways that improve your work life by helping you to be more efficient, productive, influential, prosocial, assertive, responsive, affable, leader-like, and relationship-oriented. Put another way, using our golf analogy, communicating strategically at work can help you stay out of the sand trap and in bounds!

You may have heard the term “strategic communication” used to describe an organization’s efforts to communicate with its constituents in ways that are aligned with its mission and goals (e.g., through public relations, marketing materials, branding, and public statements).8 For example, organizations with a social media presence typically have a strategy that addresses which social net- work sites they use, what is communicated

through their accounts, how often, and by whom. This type of strategy assists the orga- nization in controlling its story, keeping its messages consistent, and building positive relationships with its online followers. How- ever, for the purposes of this introduction to communication at work, we are taking a step back and examining strategic communication as the behavior of individual communica- tors. Strategic communication involves setting communication goals and then enacting ver- bal and nonverbal communication behaviors,

including listening, consistent with predeter- mined objectives. Strategic communication is an important approach to understand and practice with coworkers, superiors, clients, customers, and other third parties (such as vendors, prospective customers, community leaders, government officials) that you com- municate with relative to your work.

Strategic communication begins with an aware- ness of what you would like to accomplish; that is, every effective message begins with one or more clear goals. Not only does goal setting and strategy improve communication outcomes, but also research indicates that setting goals for communication can enhance a person’s psy- chological willingness and readiness to communicate with others. In an experimental study published in The Modern Language Journal, people with low willingness to interact with others became more con- fident and enthusiastic about communicating when taught to set goals and visualize a strategy for their communication performance.9

Consider two communication scenarios. In the first, the source lacks both a clear, articulated goal and an appropriate strategy. Matt was unhappy with his grade in his accounting class. He went to see his teacher and sort of stammered about not liking his grade on the midterm, feeling like the grading had been unfairly harsh on one of the assignments, and not understanding the concepts. His teacher had little idea of the purpose of Matt’s visit: Did he want extra help and suggestions on how to improve his performance; or was he there to complain and hopefully persuade the teacher to adjust his grade? Matt did not have a clear goal in mind when he went to see his teacher, so his messages were scattered and unfocused. When the conversation ended, he didn’t feel any better about his situation, and his teacher felt like Matt had wasted his time.

In contrast, consider this second example. When Maria decided she needed to confront a team- mate at work who had been missing project meetings and submitting late work, she spent a few days reflecting on the myriad problems with her teammate Jasmine’s performance. She made notes and prioritized the issues she wanted to discuss. She had a basic goal in mind: To change her coworker’s behavior. With that goal in mind, she took into consideration what she knew about Jasmine’s per- sonality and communication style and devised a strategy for successfully accomplishing her objective. Maria knew that Jasmine was likely to react defensively and perhaps resist working with the team even more if she took an aggressive approach. She also knew that Jasmine struggled with time man- agement. Maria decided to take a friendly, nonconfrontational approach—to be descriptive and give examples of what wasn’t working for the rest of the team about Jasmine’s participation and contribu- tion. Having this goal and strategy in place, Maria was much less apprehensive and more willing to have this difficult discussion with Jasmine. She went into the discussion with several suggestions from

her own experience about how to successfully manage time. She viewed Jasmine as a friend, rather than an adversary, and entered the conversation with the assumption that Jasmine would want to work harder to be a more productive member of the team. Because she had a goal and a correspond- ing strategy, Maria had a successful meeting with Jasmine—and over time, Jasmine became a fully participative teammate again.

This book covers a range of goals that people commonly seek to achieve through communication at work and suggests a strategic and competent approach for tackling them. In this Shadow a Profes- sional feature, learn how Don Marshall, Senior Customer Success Manager with Aspect Software, relies on strategic communication to support his firm’s clients and to work within the company to secure resources necessary for ensuring client success with Aspect’s suite of software solutions.