



Achieving a Critical Connection Through Communication

How Fit Leaders Avoid Ambiguity

By David Chinsky, MBA, DrPH

IN the busy life of an Association Executive, a good portion of the day and evening is spent communicating with others. Whether we are interacting with our team, with our volunteers or with other key stakeholders, it is crucial that we check in often to make sure that our messages are being received fully and accurately.

How many times have Board Chairs or Chief Staff Executives (CSEs) thought to themselves: "Why don't they get it? I've said it five times now and they still aren't doing what I asked them to do." Often, we can be so clear in our own mind about what we are saying that we actually leave out important information in our communication. This occurs because we tend to take important details for granted given our obvious familiarity with our own ideas.

There are a number of strategies we can employ to ensure that what we intend to say is actually being said, heard and understood by others. One of the easiest ways to check whether our communication is achieving a critical connection with the receiver of our message is to simply ask "What questions do you have for me?" Please note this is different from asking "Do you understand?" When we ask someone if they understand, it is human nature for people to agree and avoid any possible indication they in fact do not understand or didn't hear everything they needed to.

I am reminded of an episode from the TV series *Seinfeld* in which Jerry Seinfeld's friend George receives an assignment from his boss

at the New York Yankees. George didn't have a clue what his boss had just asked him to do. Rather than admitting he did not understand what he was asked to do, George proceeds to use all 30 minutes of the episode trying to figure out what he is being expected to deliver to his boss. He approaches one person after another and fails miserably at the end of the show to deliver the goods.

Most Chairs and CSEs would agree that the best time to own up to not fully understanding an assignment is when the assignment is first given. This allows the person giving the assignment to restate it and to fill in any missing information. I don't know too many executives who would not prefer that their employees raise their hand right then and there and say "I'm sorry, but I just don't understand what you are asking me to do" or "I zoned out for a few seconds and I missed the last thing you said. Would you please repeat it?"

While executives may be open to this honest sharing by their employees of "not understanding," the reality is that it is difficult for many of us to admit that we were not listening or that we got distracted. We know we are supposed to be paying attention, and it can be embarrassing to ask someone, particularly our boss, to repeat themselves. As executives, we also may have created a culture, often unintentionally, which makes it unsafe to raise your hand and ask for clarification. Therefore, it is important for executives themselves to initiate questions to ensure they have communicated fully.

Possible questions that can be used to check for understanding might include: "How

do you propose to proceed with this project?," "What additional resources will you require?" and/or "What else can I share with you to help you get started?" These open-ended questions can only be answered effectively if the person we are communicating with has been listening and truly understands what we have just said. If we get a confused stare or a response that doesn't make sense, this is our clue that we need to restate our request without "punishing the listener" for missing the point. We are as responsible as our listeners to be clear in our communication and, if there is a disconnect, it is best for us to own its repair.

The most important thing when communicating with others is to avoid ambiguity. We want to be certain there is clarity around our messages and that nothing has interfered in the process. Asking our employees or our volunteers to restate an assignment in their own words, or to summarize in writing what was discussed or requested are other ways to check for understanding. This provides an opportunity for either party to the communication to say "That's not what I said" or "That's not what I meant; let's go over this again."

The time we spend up front ensuring that communication is aligned is well worth our investment. We all can point to the effort that often gets spent, after the fact, when we have to pick up the pieces when the job doesn't get done due to miscommunication. Each of us can add to our portfolio of positive habits the simple and valued step of checking for understanding as we move through our day communicating with others to achieve our objectives. ■



David is President of David Chinsky & Associates, an executive coaching and management development firm. David is the creator and founder of The Institute for Leadership Fitness™ and can be reached at dchinsky@theleadershipfit.com or by calling 866-960-LEAD.