

Member's Quarterly

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President's Message

Better Communications at Work

Become expert communicators

I read quite a bit about management and quite frankly, there's not that much new in most of the material. A number of experts find a way to package old ideas into a new framework that helps better explain the process of engaging and motivating employees. One book that I came across recently zeroed in on a key aspect of management - the ability to communicate ideas to employees in such a manner that they will not just listen, but actually hear the message being delivered to them.

That book is called *Supercommunicators* by Charles Duhigg, and he talks about expert communicators who know how to have and lead a conversation, especially at work. Duhigg says that when we talk, we're actually participating in one of three types of conversations: practical (What's this really about?), emotional (How do we feel?) and social (Who are we?). The challenge, in his view, if we want to become better communicators at work, is to know which type of conversation we're in.

So, how do we do that? Duhigg is an author and a journalist who is also a graduate of Yale University and Harvard Business School. He says that we have to ask questions in order to find out. In his research, expert communicators ask 10 to 20 times as many questions as the average person. They don't just ask the usual questions, but deep and probing questions that invite the other person to reveal more of themselves and their core beliefs.

Duhigg also has some practical advice that can be used in workplace conversations. One suggestion is to prepare ourselves before any meeting by writing one sentence about what we would like to get out of the meeting. When a group does this together and shares it at the beginning of the meeting, it becomes a powerful tool for having real conversations that lead to tangible results. The question can be as simple as "What do I want to get out of this meeting?" or "What would I like to learn from others at this meeting?"

Another strategy is to ask better questions. We often go to the standard questions when we start a conversation. For example, "Where do you live?" Duhigg says we need to go deeper than that by asking other questions, such as "What do you like about where you live?" That gives us further detail and asks the other person to open up a bit more. It will give us further insight as to what is really important to them. In turn, they invite the other person to ask you more interesting questions and that's when the conversations turn into something bigger and can lead to better relationships.

One final tip from Duhigg is not new. Listen to learn. In his version of active listening, he calls on us as managers to repeat back what someone else says and ask them to confirm what you heard. He calls this 'looping', and it not only leads to better understanding, it can also diffuse a difficult or heated conversation.

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