



Charlie Fewell,
Charlie Fewell & Associates

Charlie Fewell helps business leaders improve vital business outcomes through keynote presentations, on-site training, or multi-day consulting engagements. He works with people in the automotive industry to build strong relationships inside and outside the company, create a sustainable financial model, and develop the potential that resides within the workforce. He has spent more than 30 high-octane years in the automotive environment, having worked with business-to-business sales professionals, franchisees, and customer service employees in the wholesale distribution environment. He authors the Fill 'er Up with Fewell newsletter and series of training guides, and is a frequent speaker for national trade associations and corporate organizations. His vision is to help people in business improve their performance by fueling change to transform business results.

Call Charlie Fewell
662.895.1171
www.CharlieFewell.com



It's Good to Talk

Communication builds strong relationships.

I work with a lot of people in high-stress business situations, from managers and senior executives all the way to the front-line employees. Much of my time is spent listening and understanding the kind of stresses and strains that cause that little vein in your temple to throb. You know what I'm talking about. You can't get the guys to do the job they've been asked to do; the administrative support doesn't listen; the boss won't give us clear instructions; the suppliers sent out the wrong order. Notice a common theme here? The more I work with these professionals and the more research I undertake, the more obvious it becomes to me that flawed communication gets that little stress vein going more than any other workplace problem.

We're talking here about relationship management and I can tell you that most relationship damage is caused by the inability of the parties to communicate clearly. Don't get me wrong, I know there are myriad ways a relationship can break down. But in my experience, communication tends to be the common denominator. Within this issue, I have identified two distinct communication factors that are often forgotten, but are so important to consider: skills and process. Without fundamental communication skills, you cannot manage a relationship with a customer, business associate, employee, or even a family member. These are essential tools for human interaction. Without a clear process—time and space you allocate to communicate with the individual and manage the relationship—you will never even get the chance to put these skills to good use! All relationships, whether professional or personal, require skills and process.

Here's a story from my personal experience to illustrate this. For several years, my relationship with my dad was in need of a lot of attention. As he neared the end of his life my role became more of a caretaker than a son. For about two years, we had a communication process where I would get in my car, drive 85 miles and visit him at his home, which was at the time an assisted living environment. Due to my professional commitments and congested travel schedule, the best time for me to set up that communication process was every Sunday afternoon.

The communication dynamic in our relationship worked like this: I would call before I left home and ask him about his personal needs that I could meet by stopping at the grocery store. Like most guys of his generation he wasn't fussy, but he had a few creature comforts. He liked a certain kind of hand lotion, had his favorite throat lozenges, loved peanut butter and

crackers as a snack, and was partial to an occasional Coke. Although it wasn't much, it was still imperative that I made sure he had a steady supply of these staple snack items between visits.

I would stop and purchase the things he needed on the way to see him, and he looked forward to my visits. I would take him out to eat or we'd go for a stroll, just to help him get outside the home for a while. We would chat about various things during our time together. Some of the conversation was repetitive and some was about new things happening in both our lives.

As his health deteriorated, the environment changed from getting out for a while to simply sitting with him for a few hours in his room and having a conversation. The topics may have been different, but the process and allocation of time to talk did not change. I asked a lot of questions to determine his mental and physical state, how the in-laws were, had he heard from my brother, etc. The process was designed to understand what was going on in his life, and what might have changed since we last conversed.

In this personal relationship, I was playing the role of a caring, concerned son in my dad's life. We both had expectations of each other in this relationship. He expected me to have some face-to-face time with him regularly. Even though I was taking care of him, I expected him to make some time for me too. There is always a balance in relationships and this was no different. I wanted him to know that I was attentive, caring, and concerned about his wellbeing, and I truly was. So we had an unwritten pact that required participation from both sides. This was our process.

Now I understand that you are unlikely to develop as meaningful and demanding a relationship with your customers or associates as I did with my dad. But the fundamentals are the same. The process I outlined is all about time and dedication. I wanted my dad to see that I cared and was attentive, just as you need to convey your diligence, reliability, and expertise to your customers. It is important to establish processes for all your business relationships in order to see them flourish. Set aside some time to tend to these relationships, and you will be amazed by the results you'll see in your business.

Questions You Need to Ask

Take a moment and list the names of the most important people with whom you need a solid relationship.

Here are some questions you should be able to answer: What role do you play in each of their

lives? What are their expectations of you? What results do you desire with each relationship? How do you want the other party to see or feel about you as a result of the relationship? What communication process is in place that allows you to transfer both information and emotion on a regular basis? For each relationship that is important to you, it is vital that you design a process and allocate time for communication to occur.

The Essential Skills

The basic skills of communication are writing, reading, speaking, and listening. I know this seems like simple stuff, but if you reflect on your performance in these areas, you will see where I am coming from: the five-word email, the grunted response, the vague instruction. Think about it—is your written communication clear, concise, and easy to understand? Most importantly, when you communicate in writing, do you write with the intended recipient's understanding in mind?

When you read something written to you, do you actually read it or do you find yourself scanning? I have found that due to the amount of information available to us,

and the phenomenal expansion of communication avenues today, most people scan when they read and consequently miss the meaning and intent of many messages coming to them. It is important to make the effort to truly digest what you are reading—this is what leads to understanding. When speaking to another person, use verbal intonation such as voice tone, pitch, accent, and speed to lend understanding to your message. When listening for the verbal response, think about the non-verbal messages you are sending. Body language matters! Do you listen to understand instead of formulating a response while the other person is speaking? Do you concentrate fully on what the other person is saying, or do you interrupt non-verbally, sending all types of messages to them while they are speaking?

In order to allow a maximum amount of information and emotion to transfer, it is imperative that you understand that your words, the vocal intonation, and the body language that you use must convey a congruent message. They must all agree in the eyes of the receiver of the information. The research of Albert Mehrabian, author of

the groundbreaking 1970s body language study *Silent Messages*, demonstrates that whenever we are communicating both information and emotion, the odds are that the other party will trust the non-verbal and voice intonation parts of your communication more than the words being spoken. That's how important body language is.

Best Practice

Become a proficient and dedicated listener. Concentrate with your mind and your emotions when listening. Attempt to find the other person's intentions and meaning expressed in the communication. Allow the other person to convey their perspective while communicating and use non-verbal communication that is congruent with verbal responses.

How do you get started improving your communication skills and making your relationships more solid? Identify the relationships that are the most important to you and create a process that will enable communication to occur, just like I did with my dad. Remember, think about clarity and body language, and listen to understand. ■



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