

Surprise!

Communication Disaster

By: Shawn Kent Hayashi

What do you think of when you hear the word "Surprise?" Parties with unexpected gifts are the fun surprises. Mishaps in communication are more common.

Have you heard the wise saying, "Never surprise your boss?" In communicating with others, it is best not to create unwanted surprises. Consider these examples:

An administrative assistant is asked to get information on airfare for an upcoming trip. The assistant tells her boss that there are three flights to choose from and the fare will be \$350. The boss tells the assistant to book the 11 a.m. flight. A day later the assistant tells the boss, "The flight has been booked, a non-refundable ticket, for the 11 a.m. flight. By the way, when I called back, the fare for the 11:00 flight was \$485." What is the surprise?

A sales representative is very excited about a new client who ordered \$500,000 worth of product on credit with 20% down up-front. The excited sales rep tells his manager that this order is "in his pocket." A few days later, the sales rep finds out that the credit department will not approve the new customer's credit, so the sale does not go through. The sales rep doesn't tell his boss this news, because he doesn't want to upset him. At the end of the month, the boss has to track down the sales rep to ask what happened. Who is surprised?

A waitress says that an item cannot be ordered in an appetizer size. You know it can, you ordered it that way last week. You tell the waitress that you would like the appetizer size and tell her to ask the kitchen if they would do it for you. She comes back with the regular size order and puts it in front of you. After you have eaten from the dish, the waitress apologizes. She just found out that this dish could be ordered as an appetizer size. At the end of the meal you are charged for a regular entrée. Surprise!

These kinds of communication surprises cause us to lose our internal and external customers. What can we do to avoid creating these problem surprises for ourselves?

Listen to yourself when you speak. Be clear about each point you are making. Watch for clues that the other person understands the meaning of your words. Also, listen for what is important to the other person. Talk to them in terms of their values and needs. Report what will help them work more effectively.

Listening does not only mean letting others talk, but drawing information from them that will help you help them. The following steps are key to listening effectively: paraphrasing, asking questions to clarify, and then giving your feedback or ideas. It is vital that you use these steps in order when you are communicating something that could cause conflict, that may be emotional, or that is very complex. When I lead workshops teaching people how to listen, they want to jump over the paraphrasing. They say, "It's obvious! Why do I need to repeat it?" Don't repeat like a parrot!

Use one or two sentences to state the facts and emotions that you believe were communicated by the other person.

For example, a hotel desk clerk might say, "You have a confirmation number and I can't find you in our system for this evening. I know this is frustrating for both of us." This builds rapport and shows that you care about the communication. Using a few sentences to paraphrase helps you to clarify. Ask a question to broaden your understanding of the issue. The hotel desk clerk might say, "We will get you checked in today. If you don't mind, I'll ask you a few questions that will help us make this go faster. Could your reservation have been made under your company name?" The administrative assistant in the earlier example might have asked her boss, "Which is your priority for this flight, the time of day you fly or the price?" If she had asked this question, she would have been listening for what was most important and would not have surprised her boss with miscommunication a few days later.

Give feedback when any part of the communication has changed. The sales rep needed to circle back to his boss even though the information would be disappointing. A phone message or email explaining what had happened with the prospect's credit would have been sufficient. The boss may have even been able to help resolve the issue, but at a minimum would not feel that the rug had been pulled out from under him. Something similar recently happened to me. I was asked to lead a meeting for 185 people and I invested several hours in the design of the meeting before I called to confirm the final plans the day before the event. The coordinator told me, "Last week the VPs decided that the sales and customer service folks need to attend too, so the meeting will now be for 385 people." This is no minor change! It effected handouts, the design of activities, and the logistics for the room set up. Surprise!

You can avoid these unwelcome surprises by communicating the whole message, listening and, providing feedback quickly. Relationships depend on trust and trust begins with reliable communication. Leave the surprises for gift giving!

.....

© Shawn Kent, President of Influence Mastery Inc., works with organizations that want their people to connect better with others and with people who want to communicate more clearly. She is the author of Mastering Your Influence™ and The Influence Journey. Shawn is available for coaching or training on Influence, Mentoring, Networking and Presentation Skills. Call 888-959-1188 for more information.