

CEP Magazine – June 2024



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Blah, blah, blah . . . Did you understand it?

By Mónica Ramírez Chimal, MBA

How many times have you been confused by a person? When was the last time someone asked you to repeat what you were saying because they couldn't understand you? The “blah, blah, blah” is more common than we think.

Communication is essential for compliance officers and auditors, as it helps obtain necessary information. It is a complex skill because it doesn't depend only on the speaker.

Pay attention to this: When someone speaks, what they say is only 10% of the message. Thirty percent is tone of voice, and 60% is body language. That is, 90% of the message lies not in what we are saying but in our tone and posture.^[1] Has this happened to you? A person seems angry, but when you ask what is wrong, they answer, “Nothing. I'm fine.” Do you believe them? Of course not. Their posture and tone are not consistent with what they are telling you. And if they are not consistent, then what they say is not credible. For this reason, police officers, investigators, and even auditors are trained in nonverbal language precisely because of its importance. Sometimes, you can easily spot lies by looking at a person.

So, we must learn to communicate clearly and effectively because, as compliance officers and auditors, we must turn to people for information and explanations. And that's when you need to be skillful. The more comfortable someone is with you, the more open they will be to sharing information and providing what you need.

Communication mistakes

It is important to know the mistakes we make when communicating. These mistakes can negatively affect our speaking or writing.

We use technical language or abbreviations

It's OK to use technical language and abbreviations with your peers; however, if it's an audit or compliance report, it's better if the language is less technical and abbreviations are explained. Not all people have the same level of knowledge on a subject. You will be surprised, but sometimes, not even the CEO knows the technical language of compliance or internal audit. Speaking or writing with simpler vocabulary will make it easier for anyone to understand you.

We aren't clear on what we need or want

I've seen this many times: People struggle to say directly what they want or need. So, what do they do? They talk evasively, going from one topic to another, and the result is that the listener only gets confused. We need to learn

to speak more directly. It isn't impolite; on the contrary, a straightforward person has immense value in this world where we lack time. Make your life simple, and don't confuse others! If you can't summarize what you need or want, ask for a colleague's help. Sometimes, talking with someone else gets your ideas in order. Practice saying what you need or want. Obviously, do it in a kind way; speaking directly doesn't have to be rude.

We use a foreign language

This is very common in Latin American countries: using English, assuming everybody knows it. Don't do that. Use the local language so more people understand you. If there is a word that you don't know, use a synonym or explain it. Again, if you make it simple, it's very likely your message will be well received.

And if you use translators online, review the results. Someone from my team used a translator because he didn't know English. When we read the report, it said, "The fulfillment team has carried out the revision . . ." Compliance in Spanish can also mean fulfillment, but in this case, it should have been translated as "compliance." Using the right word is key so your message is clear and understood.

Now, we mistakenly think that the speaker is more important than the listener, but it's not. *We must learn to listen.*

We pseudo-listen

People put themselves in "airplane mode" (as I call it) and don't pay attention to what is being said. Do you remember what was said at the last meeting? Maybe you were drawing in your notebook or planning what to do for the weekend. What agreement was reached? Who knows! You weren't listening.

We make quick conclusions

Has this happened to you? You're talking, and the listener finishes your sentences? It may make you laugh at first, but you won't find it funny after a few times. You end up telling the person to be quiet and listen to what you have to say. Making quick conclusions about a speaker's intent does no good because you are not listening; you are making up stories that do not exist.

We assume

This goes hand in hand with making quick conclusions. You are talking, and the person decides to end the conversation because they assume certain things. For example, you ask your subordinates to finish a report, and when you ask if it is finished, they answer, "I already know what you are going to tell me. I should have finished it earlier, but I couldn't. I don't care if you evaluate me poorly. I know you don't like me." Wow! But what happened here? Maybe you were only asking because you wanted to add additional information, but the subordinate, assuming other things, already put together a story—or, should I say, a soap opera?

We prepare to respond

I have seen this in interviews and when asking questions. Suppose you are validating a report, and you tell the person that there were shortages in the inventory, but they were minimal. The person in front of you, the moment they heard that there were shortages, prepared to respond as soon as you finished speaking. They defend the procedure of how inventories are carried out and tell you there are minimal differences. It is precisely what you said, but in their eagerness to respond, they did not hear you. Preparing to respond only biases and limits communication and keeps the message from being fully delivered.

We interrupt

I think we have all experienced being interrupted. You are talking and suddenly the other person asks you a question or says something before you finish speaking. You were just going to say what the person who interrupted said, but they didn't let you finish. In addition to being annoying, it is rude. It is better to let the person speak—and finish.

We are defensive

If we are defensive, then we are assuming something. And if we assume we have already made a quick conclusion and are prepared to respond. Being on the defensive does nothing good for us because the result can be catastrophic. Breathing and calming down before talking is best if you have any negative feelings. What bothers you can be magnified by having a defensive attitude.

As you can see, these mistakes have something in common: They hinder communication. That is why it is imperative to speak directly about what we need or want, listen, and identify how the listener is reacting to what we are saying.

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