



The Well-Practiced Manager

Professional Development
Resource for
Boston College Managers
and Supervisors

Spring 2017

From the Director:

Dear Managers,

At Boston College, we strive to provide a supportive working environment that enables all of us to perform to the best of our capacity. The foundation of this is our ability to communicate with one another effectively.

We talk all the time, but we don't often talk about the quality of those conversations and how they could be better. Poor communication can create misunderstandings, cause hurt feelings and delay projects. Over time, it can erode productivity and create a negative atmosphere. Conversely, being good communicators helps to build stronger relationships, fosters productivity and enhances the workplace.

That is why this semester we are offering workshops on how to improve communication. We're also raising the topic in this newsletter to spark discussions on the issue. An important step toward better communication is to focus on it.

If you have any thoughts on the topic, I would be happy to hear them.

Wishing you all the best in this spring semester,

Bernie O'Kane

Bernie O'Kane

Director, Office of
Employee Development



Improving Communications for a Better Work Environment

Everyone thought the early Monday morning meeting to plan a fundraising event had been productive and the project was well under way. But by Friday, Mary was upset that Jack hadn't finished a proposal for the caterer and Jack was annoyed that Mary didn't like the list of vendors he'd worked on all week.



Despite all the talk in the meeting, there had been significant miscommunication. As a result, expectations had not been met and the project had fallen behind. In addition, team members were annoyed with each other and finding it difficult to work together.

Teams often talk about how to approach projects, but it's less common that they talk about how they communicate.

"Human communication is an amazing thing and there are great opportunities to learn how we can do it well, which can lead to more positive interactions," said Jeannette Gerzon, an organizational development consultant who presents workshops on the topic for the Office of Employee Development.

Most people speak at a rate of 125 words per minute. However, we can process up to 400 words per minute. That leaves room for a lot of thoughts to compete with the words we're hearing. Additionally, people have different communication styles that can make it even more difficult for us to truly hear one

another. For instance, Mary tends to be deliberate, direct and open as she talks while Jack is fast-paced and process oriented. Being aware of those different styles can make it easier to find ways to connect.



continued

Self-Improvement for Better Communication

One of the best ways to improve conversations is by becoming a more active listener, Gerzon said.

It does take some practice, but the results are more meaningful and effective communications.

As an active listener, you concentrate on what the other person is saying and make sure he or she feels that they've been heard. It requires being present in the conversation and resisting distractions like texts or phone calls. The benefits are a stronger connection between those in the conversation. You will hear more of what the other person is saying, and you will find it easier to convey your message.



Becoming an effective active listener is a matter of practice. Here are a few exercises to try:

- Be present in the conversation. Put the phone away. Stop thinking about the article you just read. Focus on the people with whom you are talking.
- Think about the information you are hearing rather than planning what to say in response.
- Try making fewer judgements about the information as you hear it. Listen with a neutral mindset.
- Ask questions. This can help you remember what is being said as well as learning more about the context.
- Paraphrase what you've heard to the speaker. "So this is what I hear... Is that right?" This lets the speaker know you are trying to listen and gives them an opportunity to clarify if you've misunderstood something.



Approaching Difficult Conversations

Active listening skills are even more important when it comes to conversations that we would rather put off such as those about performance or disagreements.

"We have found that people will put up with negative behavior to avoid conflict," said Stéfane Cahill Farella, Boston College Associate Director, Organizational Effectiveness. "But these conversations shouldn't be confrontational. In fact, if they're handled well, they can actually build relationships and make the workplace more positive."

It's important to approach these conversations with truth and respect, said Cahill Farella who conducts workshops on the topic, such as "How to Have a Crucial Conversation." You need to be honest and let the person know what is going on but in a supportive way that encourages a mutually beneficial resolution.

Set your expectation for the conversation to be constructive and an opportunity to find a solution. Go into the conversation with a sense of inquisitiveness to reduce emotions. Ask questions and seek to understand the other person's perspective. Think ahead of time about the ideal resolution based on what you know but be prepared to develop an alternative based on what you hear.



Employee Development Office

Department of Human Resources • 129 Lake Street
617.552.8532 • employee.development@bc.edu • www.bc.edu/ed

Editorial Services provided by
Jennifer Powell, The Excellent Writers
excellentwriters.com

Graphic Design by
Tania Fine Helhoski, BirdDesign
birddesignstudio.com