



April 2009

Communication Tip of the Month

Helping Your Words & Actions Speak Volumes

Learning to Speak in 1-2-3 Communication

*"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."
-- Albert Einstein*

For seven years, I was a communications consultant with IBM. I found it challenging to dive into the minutiae of technology that focused on fitting "A" into "B" so "C" would work.

While there, I developed a weekly deliverable for stakeholders and executives. That meant most of my day involved talking with "techies" who were immersed in the details of making things run smoothly.

I had to simplify the jargon and highlight how the change would save time, save money or improve productivity...because that's what this audience wanted to know.

The main thing I discovered was that no matter how complex technology seems, it is a straightforward process. "A" has to work properly for "B" to function so result "C" can be created. If "A" isn't working, you can't move forward. You are at a complete standstill.

I honed my communication skills considerably during this time. Once I learned how to speak in a "1-2-3" fashion with the tech folks, I truly enjoyed learning about the new technology that was being deployed.

This "1-2-3" type of communication also applies to the way we speak.

When speaking, do you notice:

...your colleagues interrupting to ask for clarification?

...your listeners "getting ahead" of you or jumping to conclusions before you finish making your point?

...your listeners looking bored or uninterested after a while?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may need to consider using "1-2-3" communication.

"1-2-3" communication means you explain yourself clearly and coherently so listeners understand you easily...the first time.

Granted, we all get a little frustrated with communications now and then. But if you're consistently experiencing interruptions, or find that people get ahead of you or seem disinterested, maybe it's time to evaluate some options for improvement.

I admit that I was hesitant to write on this topic because many of you will read this and say, "Yeah, Michelle...Duh!" Most of us think we've got this one wrapped up without a problem. But after being put into a near-comatose state by someone who considers herself a strong communicator, I decided this topic was more important than I'd originally thought.

So please read and heed if this applies to you. (There's a "forward" option at the bottom of this email, FYI.)

Mix up your inflection, speed and pitch. If you see the eyes of your listeners glazing over, you're probably speaking in a monotone voice. Droning on means your listeners will nod off or tune you out because they can't absorb the information. Varying your inflection, speed and pitch is much more interesting to the ear.

And if you're trying to project authority or leadership, lower your pitch. This increases your credibility and commands attention. (Applies to women and men)

Pause. It's perfectly fine to take a moment to organize your thoughts before you speak. Most listeners are patient with a quiet pause, especially if your communication is clear, understandable and encourages questions, comments or conversation.

Limit your "verbal pauses." When you pause, try not to include "ums" or "ahs" if possible. This is distracting, and listeners may think you're nervous or uncomfortable.

Though our President speaks with "1-2-3" communication, he includes too many "ums" and "ahs" for my taste. I'm sure these verbal pauses give him a moment to organize his thoughts, but I'd prefer that he use a "silent pause" so I'm not distracted from what he's saying.

Be specific. The more specific your words, the easier it is to hold someone's attention. Vague words like "always," "never" and "kind of" are too generic. Use specific words to paint a vivid picture that engages the listener and keeps him or her actively participating in the conversation.

Determine how much detail is needed. Some stories need detail. Others do not. If you spend chunks of your conversation saying, "It was a '66 Mustang...no, wait, it was a '67...or was it a '68?...you know, I think it was a '66..." please know that your listeners are desperately trying to think of somewhere else to be.

If certain details are not important to making your point, *let them go!* If you do this, I can confidently say you'll have more friends at the end of the conversation.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither were your speech patterns. Focus on one area at a time, and be patient with yourself. It only takes 21 days to create a new habit.

"1-2-3" communication is a welcome respite in a world bombarded with too many messages and too much noise. **Never underestimate the power of simplicity.**

Wishing you a Refreshing and Productive Day,



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About the Communication Tip of the Month

The Communication Tip of the Month is distributed during the first week of the month and offers tips for professional and personal communications. If you have a suggestion for an upcoming Communication Tip, feel free to email me at Newsletter@MichelleZavala.com.

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