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He Said, She Said

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Striving to understand why results have been significantly below plan, a mid-sized company zeroed in on two key departments that need to collaborate effectively and found all sorts of problems being caused by a breakdown in communication. Though hardly an uncommon situation, this breakdown is particularly

interesting because the two departments actually share working space—they are housed in a single room with an open floor plan. Two conference tables, side-by-side, mark the end of one department and the beginning of the other.

“If they turn around, they can talk and exchange papers,” notes a consultant who recently visited the company, “And they don’t do it.”

Why not? What’s the dynamic that impedes collaboration at this company and so many others? Why do the best-intentioned efforts to improve communication so often fail?

In the institutional framework, communication frequently bumps into bureaucracy. In trying to achieve something that no individual can manage alone, organizations must often put the needs of the

group above those of the individual. The individual must swallow a certain amount of personal “voice” to be part of the whole. The company mentioned above, for example, had put a lot of time into clarifying procedures, including communications protocols and the roles and responsibilities of departments and the individuals within them. That effort created a well-defined vertical structure.

“People in one department report to Mr. X and were told to communicate up the layers to him; the other department reports to Ms. Y,” the consultant observes. “So people understand that they don’t have to communicate horizontally—they aren’t encouraged or even expected to talk directly to their counterparts across the way. This is where procedures substitute for common sense.”

Although bureaucracy hinders communication, it isn’t the biggest problem. For example, a troubling scene recently occurred at a consumer products company that was developing a new product. While Production was sourcing the materials, Marketing was working on promotion strategy, including pricing. Two weeks before a meeting with the CEO, Production found a source that could cut the initial estimate of the cost per item; they put that information in an e-mail to Marketing. But Marketing had its head down, merely glancing at its continuous stream of incoming messages while concentrating on the product launch. It didn’t notice the cost change until the day before the meeting. As a result, the pricing numbers were out of whack—a problem for which Marketing lambasted Production in front of the CEO.

Production was stunned; after all, it had sent the information to Marketing in plenty of time, expecting Marketing to read all its e-mail messages. Marketing, on the other hand, expected Production to call attention to something significant in some special way.

What we've got here is the hidden threat to every human interaction: the universal tendency to make assumptions.

Every time we talk with another person, we are actually engaged in three conversations. The most obvious is verbal—the exchange of words between us. At the same time, however, there are two other conversations going on: the one in our head and the one in the head of the other person. Those internal conversations are made up of thoughts—“Do I agree or disagree? How does this fit with my previous experience? What do I want to say next?”

True communication is so hard, partly because the internal dialogues absorb so much of our attention. In addition, the external dialogue relies on words, which are nothing more than sounds to which we have assigned meaning. It's far too easy for there to be a gap in the understanding of those “assignments”—for people to use the same words but mean different things. In short, words are just one form of a common habit of thinking that clogs conversations, of not holding our own perceptions more lightly, and of not recognizing the other individual's perspective.

For example, the same consultant recently observed a conversation between two executives. After about 30 minutes, the two seemed ready to leave the room in agreement about the next steps. But she doubted that they truly had a meeting of the minds. “When I asked each of them to state his understanding of their agreement, they used exactly the same words,” she says. “But when I asked a couple of questions, they discovered that each actually meant something different.”

Absent that discovery, you know

what would have happened—down the road, each executive would be upset with the other because their “agreement” hadn't been kept. And they might not have realized that both had fallen into an all-too-normal practice: making assumptions without taking a moment to test them.

Want to avoid the “he said, she said” interactions that result in fired employees, unsuccessful mergers, or even divorce court? First, become conscious of your own assumptions. Begin by noticing your emotions: anger, frustration, sadness, joy, gratitude, and so on. Emotions may be a sign that you are hooked on a deeply held idea of which you weren't even aware, that you are bumping against your own beliefs. The ensuing flood of thoughts makes it hard to stay present so that the issue can be resolved or an agreement reached. You end up reacting rather than resolving. Worry, for example, keeps you in your own head, thinking about what might happen, spun by an unholy alliance of insecurity and imagination, rather than focused externally.

Emotional awareness isn't as simple as it may sound. As Marshall Rosenberg notes in his book *Non-violent Communication: A Language of Life*, “A common confusion generated by the English language is our use of the word *feel* without actually expressing a feeling....In general, feelings are not being clearly expressed when the word *feel* is followed by...words such as *that, like, as if*: ‘I feel *that* you should know better.’ ‘I feel *like* a failure.’ ‘I feel *as if* I'm living with a wall.’”

Such statements are actually *thoughts*. And that's helpful to remember because we may have little luck in changing our feelings, but we

can always choose how seriously to take our thoughts.

We can also become more aware of others' perceptions. Begin with something simple but profound: Talk with someone you know well with the intention of finding out at least one thing about them that you didn't know before. In other words, adopt a stance of curiosity—deliberately look for something surprising instead of *assuming* that you already know everything there is to know about them.

Effective communication doesn't have to take extra time, but it does demand greater awareness. A great lesson about that is in *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, Robert Heinlein's class science fiction novel in which a super-computer becomes “self-aware” and is befriended by a repairman. At a critical juncture, the computer asks his friend to be with him without talking, explaining: “Whenever you speak to me, I always use a large percentage of my capacity—perhaps larger than you suspect—during several million microseconds in my great need to analyze exactly what you have said and to reply correctly.”

The computer was able to run an entire planet—everything from unclogging toilets to banking to intergalactic defense—without missing a nano-beat, but what really demanded its attention was conversation with a friend. ■

These columns are meant to be a continuing conversation about the human dimension. Please help us stay out of the assumptions trap. Tell us: What's resonating? What insights or issues might you share? What questions would you like us to address? Contact us at RGunn@AccompliGroup.com or bgullickson@sbcglobal.net.