
Effective Communication

Communicating effectively—or—“How’s that again?”

■ PHILIP D. SPIESS

I think you will all agree that anyone in the right of way profession must be a good communicator. All right of way people—planners, administrators, negotiators—spend most of their time talking or writing—i.e., in explaining or discussing; questioning or answering; listening or pleading; arguing, persuading, or convincing. Thus, the right of way person’s skill in handling people (superiors and peers, subordinates and outsiders)—that is, in getting all of these people to do what the right of way practitioner wants them to do—is so much a matter of what he or she says or puts into a letter that the ability to communicate effectively is of paramount importance.

Allow me to use the word “agent” for anyone engaged in right of way work. The *American Heritage Dictionary* of the English language defines an agent as: (1) “One that acts or has the power to act;” (2) “One that acts for or as the representative of another;” and (3) “A means or mode by which something is done or caused.” Therefore, planners and administrators are, in a sense, as much agents as the field negotiators are. They are part of the “means” by which our work is accomplished.

Actually, no agent has trouble communicating, for every word, letter, and act—indeed, every tone—communicates some-

thing. The problem lies in communicating effectively, in achieving the results we want our communications to bring.

Henry Scherman once wrote an instructive book on economics entitled: *The Promises Men Live By*. What interested him was the extraordinary number of times we either do or fail to do certain things simply because we rely on someone else to do or not to do something. For example, you give instructions to a subordinate, or explain a concept to an associate, or describe a procedure or a proposed agreement to a property owner. You leave, feeling that all is clearly understood, only to discover later (usually to your regret) that what you said or wrote was not understood at all.

What interests me, however, is the number of such misunderstandings that arise, not so much from mistaken expectations, but more likely because our language is confusing and imprecise, or our spelling is bad, or our pronunciation is poor, or the connotations of our words (that is, the meaning and purpose we intend them to convey) leave something to be desired.

All of us can learn from the mistakes of others—the radio and TV commentators, newspaper people, politicians, ministers, even educators—who are experts at putting their feet in their mouths.

Politicians and political agencies are particularly adept at this. For example, a man dialed a phone number listed for the state of Louisiana. A woman answered by stating the name of her agency. There was silence for a moment. Then the man asked, “How’s that again?” She repeated, “This is the Governor’s Office for Elderly Affairs.” “For gosh sakes, sign me up,” the man replied. “I didn’t do too good even when I was young!”

Thirty-eight years of right of way work have convinced me that a good communicator needs to know only a few things—

but he or she must know those well. Good face-to-face negotiations, or good, clear letter writing, is primarily a matter of attitude. No matter how much grammar an agent has mastered, no matter how much information he or she has on the subject under discussion, no matter how much experience—without the proper attitude, that person will never be a good communicator.

Effective communication is primarily a matter of attitude: adapting to the recipient

You have to care about what you say or write, and how you say or write it, if you want it to be received in the way you intended. As Hallmark says: “When you care enough to send the very best.” And that attitude is what I call “Adaptation”—the ability to fit the tone and structure of your communication, either oral or written to the hearer or reader.

Of course, adaptation is not enough. The good communicator must also exercise sound judgment. And to reflect his judgment, both as to the subject and the receiver, he/she must have control of his/her medium. That is, he or she must be able to speak or write clearly, precisely, and effectively.

To do otherwise not only fails to deliver the message one had hoped to convey, but often becomes ridiculous as well. Here, for example, is a Health Bulletin of the United States Army: “Persons experiencing chest pains, severe leg cramps, extreme shortness of breath, or excessive fatigue should neither be required nor encouraged to complete the march. Persons experiencing these symptoms should be carefully watched until they have completely disappeared.” You bet! Otherwise the Army loses track of a lot of people!

I once had an employee who asked me: “Why, when I’ve studied composition in grade school, high school, and college, do you always edit my letters? The words I use in a business letter are the same as those I have always used in other kinds of writing.” Well, it was a legitimate question and a legitimate point. For it is true that the words, aside from a few technical terms, perhaps, are the same. It is even true that

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