

Build rapport by admitting you're wrong

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A change in mindset will improve communication

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When we start to examine the reasons behind business deals failing, employees underperforming and negotiations hitting a brick wall, it often turns out that the root cause of the problem is poor communication.

I was reminded of this recently when coaching Susan, one of my clients, who is the finance and administration director of a medium-sized property management company. She specifically complained about her lawyer, saying that he wasn't competent and never seemed to meet deadlines. These factors had twice almost led to the company losing cases which had been ongoing for months.

The first question you're likely to ask yourself is why didn't Susan find a better lawyer. Her view was that they had been working together on a series of complicated cases and she didn't want to go through the hassle of changing because it would have meant a lot of extra work for her.

The coaching sessions soon revealed that, even if she had made a change, similar problems would probably have occurred with any new lawyer. More than anything, it became clear that the way she communicated had been the major cause of difficulties. For example, she would repeatedly refer to various aspects of the case and ask if they had been fully considered. She may have thought this was helpful, but it left the lawyer feeling slightly embarrassed and disinclined to regard Susan as a top priority client. As a result, things didn't always get done on time, much of the work was handled by less experienced staff, and the relationship became tense.

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Psychology at work

I've often seen similar problems developing between a boss and subordinates, among colleagues, and between salespeople and potential customers. What, though, is happening in such cases at a psychological level?

Generally, people give the highest priority to tasks assigned to them by clients or colleagues with whom they have good rapport. In effect, getting what you want often boils down to building relationships. By developing a good understanding, even with people you may not really like or greatly respect, you are far more likely to achieve what you want. This underpins the techniques needed to create the sort of impact that leads to success.

I explained the importance of effective communication during two coaching sessions with Susan. Through careful questioning and by putting her in the lawyer's shoes, I was able to make her aware that she could quickly improve things by changing her own approach. She accepted the need to create a positive relationship with the lawyer and that it was necessary to:

- Change her mindset so as to accept weaknesses, show respect and give the benefit of the doubt;
- Change her usual style of communication to allow her lawyer to have "ownership" of ideas and plans; share useful information in an inoffensive manner; and occasionally admit to her own mistakes to foster open exchanges.

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Practical tips

I also suggested that, when she knew there was a strong chance of losing her temper, she should take a deep breath before replying. She should then start by saying she felt a sense of responsibility and wanted to find a way to cooperate. For example, if the lawyer missed a deadline, she might mention that the date had not been made clear (stating her responsibility) and ask for ideas on how to avoid any future misunderstanding (enlisting cooperation).

I find that executives often have difficulty accepting they are wrong. Usually, the higher their rank, the harder for them to accept the possibility of being at fault.

When Susan kept trying to show she knew better than the lawyer, his reaction was bound to be defensive. As soon as she changed her approach, he opened up, was prepared to admit that even lawyers did not have all the answers, and had no trouble in getting everything done on time.

It is never easy to change the way we communicate because our mindsets are usually deeply ingrained and our method of dealing with other people will have developed over years. But it is possible to change!

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Creating awareness is always the first step towards change. It can be developed by listening to feedback from colleagues or, at a more senior level, working with an executive coach. Unfortunately, awareness alone doesn't do the job. It may alter some of our beliefs or the way we look at things, but doesn't automatically enable us to act differently. Therefore, we also need to develop the competencies to achieve positive change.

For example, if a manager notices that subordinates are not fully engaged in a project, he or she might turn things around by recognising the problem, making the effort to openly acknowledge individual contributions, and no longer assuming that any suggestion by a more junior team member must automatically be modified. Doing this would usually involve a few simple changes in the manager's basic style of communication, but could have a lasting impact on relationships and staff motivation.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to develop his clients to become First-Class Leaders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

In 2004, he initiated the Master Coach Alliance (see <http://www.master-coach-alliance.com>) in Hong Kong, a network of professional Life, Business and Corporate Coaches. End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005.

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