

TRAINERS CORNER

Managing from a distance: more than just technology

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HAVE YOU EVER called a direct report the phone and given him precise instructions only to find later that he did not follow through on what you requested; or have you endured a “thirty minute” video-conference meeting that lasted two hours only to end with no resolution? If so, then welcome to the exciting new world of remote communication and management. Virtually anywhere you find people communicating and managing remotely, you also find missed information, poor accountability, a lack of follow-through and a good deal of frustration as a consequence.

There have been incredible advances in communication technologies over the past decade, and these advances have had a significant impact on the oil and gas industry. During this time, though, we have watched countless organizations be wooed by the siren song of new technologies only to find themselves snared in the unanticipated challenges of communicating effectively across distances. To date, most of us have been slow to acknowledge that effective remote management requires not only the application of sound communication technologies but also a special set of skills and a clear understanding of the way that communication works when it is conducted through teleconferencing, videoconferencing, email and the like.

There are plenty of special challenges inherent in remote communication that we could discuss presently, not the least of which is the challenge of accurately conveying the *intent* of your message. The little ways that we communicate our intent in face-to-face communication are often so subtle and habitual that we are not even aware of them. A slight twist of the lip transforms a harmless comment into a sarcastic criticism. A momentary glance in one direction clearly indicates the object to which you are referring. But when communication takes place over telephone or email, these critical expressions present a huge problem. They aren't there! All too often, we go about our business communicating as normal, unaware that an essential part of our message will never reach our audience. And we wonder why that direct report failed to do exactly what we told him!



Advances in technology have enable remote communication in management; but to be effective, employees also need to understand the challenges of remote communication and how to overcome them.

The pressing question is, are we doomed to sacrifice the clarity of our messages for the operational benefits of managing from a distance? Fortunately, the answer is “No;” but to have our cake and eat it too, we will have to adapt. The “old” ways of getting our point across just won't cut it when communicating remotely.

What, then, can be done? Our research team has observed some of the best *remote* communicators and identified a number of best practices for the rest of us to emulate. One of the best practices we observed is that, when the best communicators need to clarify the intent behind their words while communicating from a distance, they take care to state in sufficient detail *why* they are saying what they are saying. You might ask, “How does that help?”

The answer was made apparent during a classroom exercise, in which each participant was given one piece of a larger problem and then told to communicate with each other to solve the whole problem. The catch, however, was that they could not speak; rather, they had to use pens and Post-It notes to communicate. One participant, after finishing her portion of the problem, approached her coworker and scribbled the note, “What's your problem?” to which the coworker responded with an offended look on his face, “Nothing! What's your problem!” Obviously, the intent of the original message was not con-

veyed. If she had written instead, “What is your problem? *I would like to see how it fits with the one I'm working on.*” the coworker would have understood that her intent was not to insult but to problem solve. Explaining *why* you are saying what you are saying is one of many things that the best do to clarify their intent when communicating remotely.

Clearly, there are many other challenges and best practices that must be addressed. In general, we recommend a three-part solution when training people to handle the challenges of remote communication: (1) Provide your personnel with a clear understanding of the way that face-to-face communication works so that they can (2) identify the specific barriers posed by the remote communication media that they use daily, which sets the stage for them to (3) acquire the appropriate skills that will allow them to overcome these barriers.

We have found that this approach produces the best results, as it not only enables employees to diagnose the exact problems that arise in their daily communications, but it also equips them with the specific skills to overcome those problems quickly and effectively.

The RAD Group is an international organizational development consulting firm with over 25 years of experience helping organizations in the oil and gas industry.