

The Illusion of Communication

ServiceElements | Lisa Archambeau | February 2020

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." - George Bernard Shaw

Think of the many barriers to communication in our industry: Physiological – bizav is full of loud environments like the ramp and static-filled headsets where it's hard to hear and be heard. Cultural – operating around the globe, language differences can be a challenge. But far less obvious, and way more dangerous are the assumptions we all make daily. It's how an Executive request for a flight to Las Vegas can end up in NV instead of NM as intended (KLAS vs. KLVN). While it would be great if colleagues, subordinates, leaders, and even loved ones could read our minds, unfortunately most cannot. Consider the simple, common exchange below:

John (Manager): "SEI JET needs XYZ. Will you take care of this, please?"

George (Subordinate): "Sure. I've got it."

There is the illusion that effective communication has taken place...

However, John's immediate assumption is that XYZ will be done exactly as he wants it to be done, most likely, as he would do it himself. In reality, George will do it based on his own assumptions, which come from such places as how he was trained, how he's done or seen it done in the past, how his generation handles things (hastily or methodically, in-person or electronically, etc.), the way that is most in line with his personality – delegation versus doing it himself, personal values, etc.



Some of these can be great; has George completed the company's rigorous training program on providing XYZ? Or is he being mentored by Kim who's the company XYZ rock star? But some of these can yield disappointing, or even disastrous results; was his past training from his last job – an operation which just got fined by the FAA for infractions? Or is this an immediate need that he puts off until tomorrow because he is already working on several other things? And to further complicate things, John's and George's understanding of what the heck XYZ actually is may be completely different!

Since we all make unique assumptions based on our own experiences, values, needs, etc., it becomes important to share our assumptions when we communicate. This does NOT mean micromanaging. In an environment where employees are skilled, motivated, and engaged, John should not have to tell George the 10 things that XYZ entails. And as a competent employee, George will not appreciate it if he does. However, he does need to convey any critical and/or nonstandard assumptions he is making. When does XYZ need to be accomplished? Is the way SEI JET needs it different in any way from what John knows George's experience with their service to be?

And what about George's response? He, too, benefits from revealing his assumptions. In his book, Turn the Ship Around, How to Create Leadership at Every Level (2012 Greenleaf Book Group Press), (retired) U.S. Navy Captain L. David Marquet introduces a communication method he calls, "I intend" – the act of stating out loud your next intended action(s). This method balances self-inspiration and ownership with the accountability of input from others. Using this simple, straight forward principle, George can state his assumptions as what he intends to do to accomplish XYZ for SEI Jet. After John listens, either or both of them can then check for understanding and alignment:

John (Manager): "SEI JET needs XYZ *by 5pm today. Since they are new with us, I'd like you to do this personally.* Will you take care of this, please?"

George (Subordinate): "Sure. I've got it. *Since they ARE new, I intend to personally call them today to provide XYZ, and to make sure they understand and are comfortable with our process. Does that sound good?*"

John (Manager): "*That sounds great! Thanks!*"

In naming his assumptions, John effectively communicates his expectations. Using Marquet's "I intend," George effectively communicates his plan to execute John's request – a plan that matches John's assumptions as we can see by his response to George's check for alignment.

So let's move past the *illusion* and ensure that effective communication takes place!

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