



Misty River Consulting

A Communication Constraint
Level of Intent



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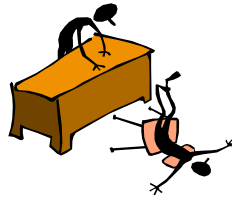
A Communication Constraint

Level of Intent

Position Power

In most organizations, people are influenced to behave in certain fashions from a variety of different forces. Good leadership, peer pressure, organizational system or infrastructure enabling characteristics, position power, fear, etc. can all influence people's behavior. However, in this essay we will be discussing position power - one of the most influential and fear provoking forces in most organizations. Position power is an:

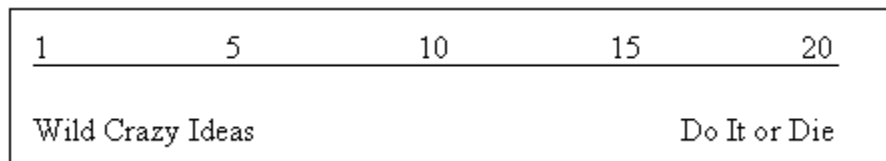
- 1) Influencing force based on one's fear that the person in the higher position may find you unacceptable.
- 2) Influencing force based on the fact that the person in the higher position has the right to end your relationship with the organization.



The higher the position, the higher the perception that the role is not the norm. Because it is not likely, in one's mind, that one will ever have that role, one assumes that the person who has that role has got something special about him or her that justifies that person having that higher role.

Level of Intent

Level of Intent is a personality characteristic of an individual indicating the person's intent tendency along a continuum between being very silly or very serious about what they are talking about.



All people have a personal communication style that tends to give them their own unique level of intent. Some people are perceived to be very silly, full of wild crazy ideas to a fault. It would seem that these individuals do not think through their ideas before they speak. In addition, these people usually do not expect that their ideas will be taken seriously.

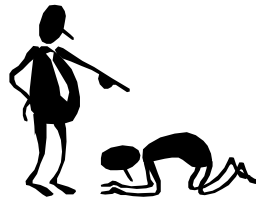
On the other hand, there are some people who hardly say anything and when they do they are extremely serious in what they have said. These people expect that others will take very seriously what they have said and act on their words.

Most people fall along this continuum somewhere - that's normal. However, communication problems can occur when those participating in the communication process at hand do not understand or misinterpret the other's level of intent.

The Interaction of Position Power and Level of Intent

Position power influences many different aspects of individual and organizational behavior. One interesting interaction that occurs is between position power and the individual level of intent present.

Given the influencing force that position power has on an individual's behavior and on an individual's fear level and given the specialness that we attribute to the higher position, a subordinate tends to adjust their level of intent upwards to a more serious level when communicating with a higher position. The subordinate wants to be acceptable, wants to insure that the probability of losing their job is low, and doesn't want to look stupid around the superior. Subordinates want a low risk situation with their superior.

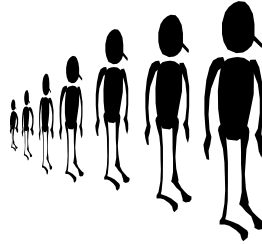


However, the person in the higher position does not usually consider the impact of their position power nor do they believe that subordinates adjust their level of intent when talking with them. Most people in these higher positions consider themselves to be just normal people trying to do their job like everybody else. They do not perceive that their subordinates are acutely aware of the risks of interacting with them. Unfortunately, this phenomenon can lead to the underestimation of the seriousness of the subordinate's message and can lead to future non-communication or even conflict between the two individuals. People do not like not being taken seriously if in fact they are serious.

Looking from another perspective, the subordinate often times overestimates the higher position's level of intent. It is difficult sometimes for people in higher positions to understand why subordinates jump through hoops to accomplish wild crazy ideas that the person in the higher role mentioned casually or in jest. However, from the subordinate's point of view, the risk of underestimating your boss' level of intent can lead to unacceptability and even termination from the organization. Consequently, subordinates often times reduce the risk that these things could occur by covering the bases – overestimating the level of intent of the superior.

Level of Intent and Symptoms of Group Think

Group think is a phenomenon that occurs when the superior is surrounded by a group of people who concur and follow the lead of the superior of the group. There are a variety of causes for group think. But one of the causes that make the group appear to be suffering from group think is “self censorship”. Members of the group censor themselves based on what they believe the group leader thinks, what he or she’s perceived level of intent is, and the degree to which they believe the rest of the group concurs with the leader.



If most of the members of the group are practicing self censorship, the leader will not hear or have the opportunity to assess the raw, more divergent information that might lead to different decisions. As a result, group think, for all practical purposes, will be present.

The probability for self censorship increases when position power accentuates the perceived level of intent of the leader to a point where the individual feels more fear from stating a divergent idea than from living with the decision that has been made by the group.

What To Do

To prevent this interaction between position power and level of intent from becoming a serious organization communication constraint, several steps can be taken. These steps include:

- 1) Creating a higher level of familiarity between the superior and subordinate through social activities that de-emphasize work.



- 2) Creating a higher level of familiarity between the superior and subordinate by the superior walking around the work place and conversing with people in a friendly and respectful fashion on issues about work as well as general personal issues.

- 3) Creating a workplace group norm where people prefix the ideas they really are concerned about with a statement of their level of intent.
- 4) Creating a workplace group norm where superiors share their level of intent on issues they aren't that serious about and that they are really serious about.
- 5) Creating a group norm among the team that divergent ideas are not only a good thing during discussions leading to significant decisions, they are critical and highly valued by the leader.
- 6) If need be, establish a "devil's advocate" role during meetings where group think is suspected to be a problem whose sole responsibility is to act as a contrarian during discussions.



There are many other things that could also be done that I'm sure are only limited by people's imagination. Whatever these preventive measures are, they should be designed to reduce the risk subordinates feel in discussing or communicating thoughts with superiors. People want to be found acceptable, they want to feel no fear, they want the risk of job termination to be low, and they want to be taken seriously when they are serious.

Incorporating some of these preventive steps or other similarly related steps to communication problems can provide big improvements in communication and understanding in most organizations.