

Thursday, October 3, 2019

When considering my preferred workplace communication style, I reflect on my supervisors over the years. Since I graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato in 2015 I have had seven different direct supervisors, each with very unique communication styles. The lessons I learned from each of them, are as different as their communication styles.

My first supervisor taught me about sincerity. Every morning he would come around the staff cubicles and give his team, myself included, high fives, and once a week he would ask us, "On a scale of 1-10, how much are you your best self?" On the surface, he seemed to care. However, rules about answering workplace trivia posted on his office door before we were allowed to ask him any task-related questions, requiring us to always carry a pen and paper, and not following through on supervisory tasks necessary for our own jobs plainly stated the opposite. His insincerity was exemplified when he was caught intentionally mis-conveying messages from the business and HR department to the team. He chose to leave staff shortly after that incident, reinforcing the broader lesson about honesty of communication.

His replacement, my second post-undergraduate supervisor, taught me the lesson of personalized communication. While he was only my supervisor for approximately four months before I left the team, he made noticeable effort to communicate differently with each of us. At times this difference was about the frequency, topic, and even method of communication. When I left the team, he re-personalized his communication with me as I shifted from a subordinate position to that of a colleague.

With a new position came a new supervisor and a new lesson learned. This time, I was the only person reporting to my supervisor, and together we were the only people in our department. Having already learned the importance of sincere and personalized communication, my third supervisor unknowingly taught me the impact of being positive in communication. He had been with the company for a longer period of time than many, and after being passed up for a promotion, his attitude turned from collegial to cynical. For months nothing seemed to go his way, and his communication with me and the rest of the office reflected it. His cynicism manifested itself in my own mood, and I began looking for options to leave. I was accepted to graduate school at my alma mater and gave my notice. Unfortunately, in a turn of events, I failed to secure an assistantship. I had to turn down my admission, knowing I could not pay for school. Already end-dated at my former employer and without a plan ahead, I found a full-time job as a barista at a big chain coffee shop.

My fourth supervisor, post-undergrad, was actually a team of managers. Collectively they modeled clarity in communication. Whether it was 4:30am or 11:00pm, I knew what tasks had to be done, and how to do them. Clarity at the coffee shop often came with systems and planning. The shifts were scheduled two weeks out and roles within shifts were assigned days before. While I learned a lot of valuable lessons from the coffee shop, including how to make the driest "bone-dry" cappuccino, I did not want to be there. Similarly, my former supervisor at my previous employer had come to the same realization and had departed from staff during my absence. His departure caused a departmental restructuring and I was asked to return to staff by his successor.

His successor was a very confident, very well planned and organized woman. She had presence and leadership and she knew the politics of the organization. While we had joined

staff at the same time in 2015, she had joined after finishing graduate school for student affairs, and now served on the company's executive team. She was busy to say the least. Her busy-ness and her personality helped teach me to be confident and efficient when I spoke, and when I listened. At times weeks would go by when our schedules would not permit one-on-one meetings. I had to think back on our last communication and consider what steps would be next. When we did meet, I had to affirm my choices and explain my reasons, succinctly. It was her who pushed me to not let my previous defeat define me, and to apply to even better graduate schools for the following year.

That following year I was successfully placed with an assistantship at Florida State University, where I met my sixth supervisor. Another woman of leadership, she presented me with the lesson of researched and informed communication. Where I had previously learned to be confident, now I was given the tools to support that confidence. This learning was supported by graduate study, but the importance of being informed in communication was made clear by her supervision. She emphasized context, background, and the negative potential impact that is possible when misinformation is shared. Much like the mentor before her, she pushed me to new professional heights, and encouraged me to seek opportunities that matched.

The summer after my first year of graduate school, as my assistantship came to an end for the year, I accepted an internship at Cornell University. There, my supervisor showed me the power of compassionate communication. It was a very difficult summer and I struggled through it immensely, as did members of my staff. Through all of it, she demonstrated the way verbally validating someone else's experience can invite a greater sense of community. It was a practice she used with me, and I was quick to adopt in my communication with my own staff. I wanted them to know that I heard them. As the summer concluded, my next opportunity was unfolding before me, and I was offered and accepted a full-time position back at Florida State.

As luck would have it the position continued to report to my sixth supervisor, someone I am proud to call a role model in my life. The new position works with a team of shared graduate students, with direct supervision of one of them. I attempt to, although at times knowingly fail to, communicate conscious of the lessons I have learned since 2015. Regardless of whether it is with supervisors, graduate students, or student leaders, the lessons I have highlighted in this reflection are relevant. Communication should be sincere, personalized, positive, clear, confident, informed, and compassionate. I also acknowledge that while I reflected on each supervisor having taught me just one of these lessons, the most positive examples of communication over the years have often exemplified all of the lessons together.

Of course, there are challenges to always keeping these lessons in mind. Unfortunate news can be hard to keep positive, routine or standard tasks can be difficult to personalize, and complex concepts are not always clear. But, by keeping these concepts in mind, I can speak cautiously when in those challenging situations. I will fail, and that's where the eighth lesson comes in, a lesson that all of my supervisors have been teaching me: accountability of communication. No matter what, positive or negative, I have to own my words. These eight concepts make me a better communicator, both professionally and personally. They also prime me to be ready to hear future ideas for improving the way I communicate with others.