LAP

Leadership, Attitude, Performance...making learning pay!

Can We Talk?

Fostering Open, Honest Communication

Objectives

A   Explain the importance of open, honest communication.

B   Demonstrate techniques to foster open, honest communication.

MBA *Research* & Curriculum Center

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Honesty Is the Best Policy

So What?

You have to communicate with many people every day—your coworkers, supervisors, customers, friends, and family. Of course, some conversations are more effective than others. Just think about the conversations you've had today. Were they confusing, frustrating, and difficult? Or were they clear, honest, and open?

It's pretty obvious which one of these communication styles is preferable—most of us have an easier time working or going to school in an environment with open and honest communication. But, as you probably know, that doesn't always happen. So what can you do to foster open, honest communication at work or in any other situation? Read on to find out!

What Is Transparency?

Transparency means being truthful when you communicate. This might seem like an obvious idea—we all know it's not good to lie, right? But transparency is more than just avoiding lies. It involves communicating openly and honestly with everyone, whether you're at work, at school, or at home. Transparency also involves speaking up about your feelings, even when it's difficult or not necessarily in your best interest.

Transparency

truth / lie

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Think, for example, about what you would do if an interviewer for a potential job asks if you have experience with a certain software program. You don't, but you really want this job, and you're sure the software will be easy to figure out. Should you tell a white lie and say that you're proficient in the software? Not if you're transparent! Being open and honest might mean saying "I don't have experience using that particular software, but I'm a quick learner, and I think I could teach myself on the job."

Or imagine what you would do if you're running behind on a project. Your boss hasn't explicitly asked if you'll meet your deadline, so it isn't really a lie not to mention it, is it? If you're committed to being transparent, you'll want to be as open and honest with your boss as possible. This means discussing the problems you're running into and being honest about the fact that you may not meet your deadline. Even when it's difficult, people who value transparency speak up.

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▲ *Would you tell a white lie in a job interview to make yourself look better? Not if you communicate transparently!*

Integrity

Characteristics of Open, Honest Communication

How can you identify open and honest communication when you see it? Check out these characteristics of transparency.

- **It gives people the information they need.** This means giving clear and complete instructions, answering questions, and being honest about any setbacks or limitations. However, transparent communication doesn't just give people useless information, spread rumors, or hurt others—it gives the information that people *need* to do their jobs or live their lives. If your boss is transparent, s/he will tell you everything you need to know about your next project, including your deadline, any problems you might run into, and resources you might need.

- **It avoids half truths.** As you already know, being transparent includes avoiding lies. It also means that you avoid half truths, or partial lies, as well. Transparent people know that telling the whole truth is important, even if it's hard. Open, honest communication doesn't mislead people or attempt to hide the truth. For example, imagine that your teacher congratulates you for doing a great job on a project. However, you know that your group members also contributed a lot of work. If you're transparent, you won't just take all the credit—you'll let your teacher know the role that your group members had in making your project successful.

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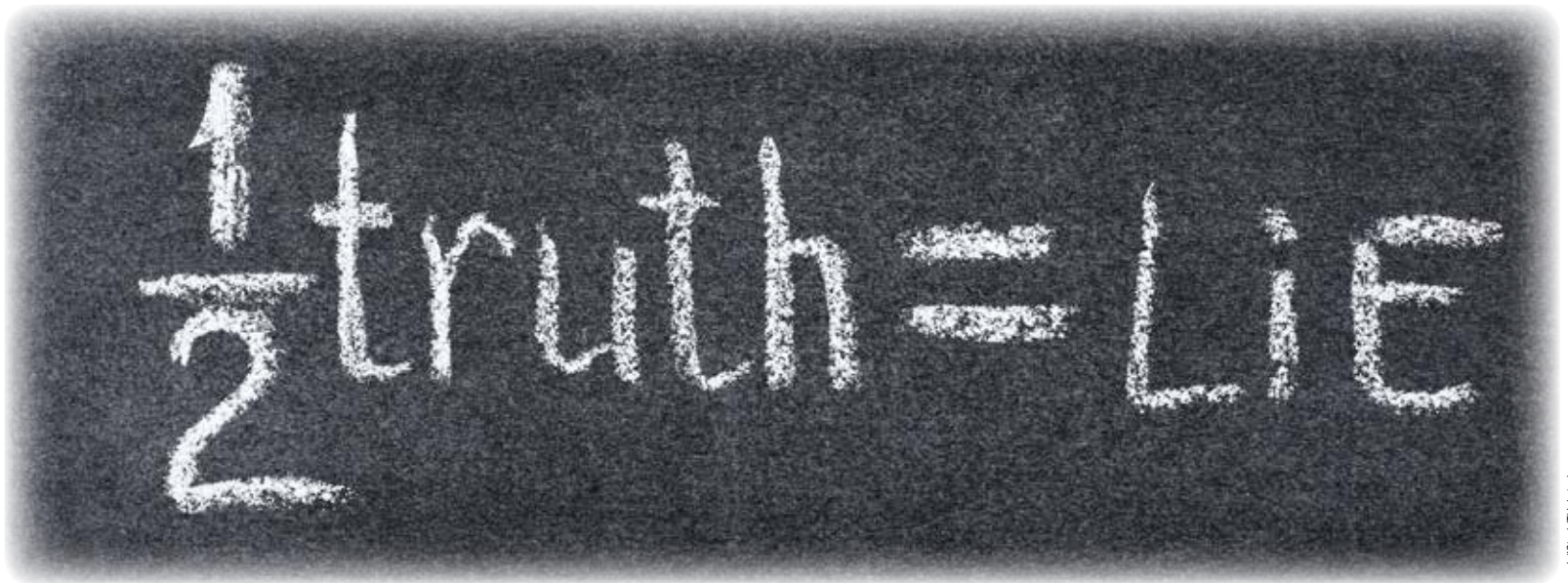
- **It is consistent and ongoing.** If your boss is very open about your project goals in a meeting, but then avoids talking to you whenever you have a question, would you consider it open communication? Probably not. Being transparent isn't something people can do once and then forget about—instead, it has to happen on a consistent, ongoing basis.

- **It encourages questions and suggestions.** Transparency doesn't just go in one direction. A boss who values transparency will encourage her/his employees to ask questions and share new ideas. This is also true in a school setting—a teacher who values transparency will be happy to answer your questions about the standards s/he used to grade your latest essay.

- **It allows for conflict.** Whenever people are being honest, there's bound to be occasional conflict—and that's okay! Two coworkers might not agree on the best way to complete a project, but transparent communication allows those coworkers to talk through their differences and come up with the best possible solution. Transparent people know that disagreements happen and that open, honest communication is the best way to resolve them.

◄ *When lots of people share their opinions, they don't always agree. Transparent communication helps people talk through their differences and come up with the best possible solution.*

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Trust and Transparency

If you're an ethical person, you live by your **ethical principles**, or standards that govern your behavior, no matter what. Transparency is just one ethical principle, and it is closely related to other ethical principles, including trust. **Trust** is the belief that someone or something is reliable. Trust is essential for success in the workplace because businesses cannot run smoothly if employees can't trust each other to complete tasks or do quality work.

It's nearly impossible to build trusting relationships without open and honest communication. People will be more likely to count on you if they know that you'll be honest. Plus, remember that transparency is a two-way street. People will trust you if you're open and honest, and those people will be more likely to communicate openly and honestly as well. Being transparent is the first step toward building trusting relationships.

This article by Nan Russell, "5 Tips To Fix Your Broken Communication And Build Trust," explains how companies can use transparent communication to create a more trusting environment: http://www.fastcompany.com/3026909/leadership-now/5-fix-your-broken-communications-and-build-trust.

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The Benefits of Transparency

There are many benefits of open and honest communication. Let's examine some of the main perks transparent people experience.

- **Strong relationships.** Would you be able to trust a friend who lied to you? What about a boss who never gave you clear directions on your projects? When people aren't open and honest, it's hard to form relationships. When people know that you will tell the truth, they are more likely to trust you and, in turn, form a strong bond with you. That's because they know that they can count on you to be honest. Transparency also leads to better teamwork because open communication fosters a greater sense of understanding. When everyone on a team can communicate, they can more easily work toward a common goal.

- **Increased productivity.** When people are able to communicate openly with each other, they will be more productive. For example, imagine that you're working on a group project. If you can be honest with other group members about the challenges you're facing on your portion of the work, you'll be able to get their help and complete your work more efficiently. Likewise, businesses that encourage transparency allow employees to ask questions when they are confused or struggling, which can lead to less wasted time. Transparency also leads to fewer misunderstandings, which can create a more productive work environment. For example, imagine a colleague is helping you on a project. You're open about exactly what the colleague needs to do, so she's able to finish the project without making mistakes or redoing her work because of unclear instructions.

The Gray Zone

While you're working late one night, you overhear your boss talking on the phone about some recent financial problems the company has been having. Sales are down, and she's not sure if things will improve anytime soon. In fact, she's considering selling the company! You had no idea the company was in trouble, and you're pretty sure your coworkers don't know anything about this, either. In the spirit of communicating openly and honestly, you want to tell them all immediately so they can be prepared. However, you don't have a lot of details, and you can't ask your boss about it since you know you shouldn't have overheard her conversation. What is the ethical thing to do? Should you tell your coworkers what you know or keep your boss's secret?

BEST IDEA

◄ *How do you find the best ideas? By encouraging everyone to share their thoughts!*

- **Better ideas.** Open, honest communication encourages everyone to share their thoughts, questions, and concerns. When everyone is inspired to contribute, you'll naturally get a wider range of suggestions that can lead to new ideas. An office-party planning committee might not know where to throw this year's holiday party, but by collecting suggestions from everyone in the office, it could find some great, unexpected ideas.

Fairness

- **A good reputation.** If you're a transparent person, word will get around that you can be trusted to be open and honest. Your good reputation can lead to new opportunities, better working relationships, and even promotions or raises. The same is true for businesses. Companies that are open about their limitations and honest with customers have much better reputations than companies that are known for hiding the truth, misleading people, or doing anything to make a sale. A company with a transparent reputation will also attract better employees.

- **Increased sales.** When customers trust a business to communicate honestly, they are more likely to support that business. Just think about where you'd rather shop—a store that is known for clearly explaining its products and warranties, or a store that is known for telling half truths to trick customers into buying?

◄ *In a conflict situation, transparency can be increased by a mediator who encourages both sides to be open and respectful.*

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- **Better conflict resolution.** Disagreements, grudges, and hurt feelings take up time that could be used more efficiently. Transparent people don't hide their feelings to avoid conflict—instead, they face disagreements openly and politely. Disagreements can be resolved and laid to rest, instead of allowed to fester and create a hostile, unproductive work environment.

Summary

Transparency means being truthful when you communicate. Characteristics of open, honest communication include giving people the information they need, avoiding half truths, being consistent and ongoing, encouraging questions and suggestions, and allowing for conflict. The benefits of transparency include strong relationships, increased productivity, better ideas, a good reputation, increased sales, and better conflict resolution.

TOTAL RECALL

1. What is transparency?

2. Identify the characteristics of transparency.

3. What is the relationship between trust and transparency?

4. List the benefits of transparency.

Transparency Techniques

Techniques to Foster Open, Honest Communication

Now that you know what it means to be transparent, how can you foster open, honest communication at work, at school, and in your personal life? Try out these techniques.

- **Listen.** What is one thing all great communicators have in common? They listen. Being open and honest isn't just about talking—it's also about actually listening to what other people have to say. This means paying close attention when a friend is confiding in you about a problem or when a coworker is detailing the struggles she's having with a project. Listening to other people's words isn't enough—you also need to notice their **nonverbal communication** (communication that uses body language instead of or in addition to words). Is someone keeping her/his arms crossed or shrinking away from you when s/he talks? If you're truly trying to foster open and honest communication, you'll try to get to the bottom of how the person is really feeling.

- **Tell the whole truth.** You already know that open, honest communication means avoiding half truths, so be sure that you put this knowledge into practice. Tell the whole truth, even when it's uncomfortable or not beneficial to you.

> ▶ *Take a look at the body language these coworkers are using. What do you think their nonverbal communication is saying?*

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► *Regular communication ensures that transparency becomes the standard.*

monkeybusinessimages/iStock/Thinkstock

- **Communicate consistently.** Being transparent isn't a one-time commitment. It requires you to be open and honest in every interaction. This may mean following up to be sure your message was understood or checking back in to answer questions. If you're working on a group project, you don't just check in with your group members at the beginning and the end of the project. Instead, you get together frequently to ask or answer questions and share your progress.

- **Be constructive.** Being transparent means telling the truth, but it doesn't necessarily mean saying everything that's on your mind. It's important to remember that open and honest communication gives people the information they *need*. Your coworker needs to know about a mistake s/he made on an important project. However, s/he probably doesn't need to know that you don't like the outfit s/he's wearing today. Make sure your communication is constructive, not destructive. So before you speak up, examine your motivations by asking:

    ✔ Why does this need to be communicated?

    ✔ Who will benefit?

- **Be polite.** It's not just what you say—it's how you say it. It's important to have **tact**, or the ability to say the right thing in any circumstance. It's also essential to show **empathy**, or the ability to relate to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of other people. For example, if a group member's work isn't high quality, it's important to speak to him/her about it in a respectful way, instead of hurting his/her feelings or insulting him/her. Being open and honest can sometimes be difficult, but it's still necessary to do it in a polite way!

  This article from Mind Tools, "How to Be Tactful," gives some tips on how you can be polite even when you're communicating tough information: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/tactful.htm.

- **Don't share confidential information.** Being open and honest doesn't mean sharing other people's private information. If a friend tells you something in confidence, you shouldn't gossip about him/her—that's being disloyal, not transparent. Likewise, if you hear your boss discussing possible layoffs, you shouldn't necessarily spread the word to everyone in your company. You don't have all the facts, and you'll probably just start rumors that may confuse and worry people.

  ▶ *Technology makes it even more challenging and important to guard confidential information and protect privacy.*

  Daviles/iStock/Thinkstock

As the TV commercial "Honesty. Pass It On!" shows, communicating openly and honestly sometimes means keeping information to yourself, even if it's uncomfortable: http://www.values.com/inspirational-stories-tv-spots/91-classroom.

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- **Ask and encourage questions.** If you aren't sure about something, speak up! Keeping a question to yourself isn't transparent, and being confused can lead to mistakes, lost productivity, and more. And remember, fostering open and honest communication isn't just about what *you* have to say—it's also about enabling feedback from others. One way you can do this is by encouraging others to ask you questions. When people feel comfortable sharing their concerns, they will be more likely to communicate openly and honestly.

- **Don't be defensive.** If you encourage other people to communicate honestly with you, you're most likely going to get some negative feedback from time to time. That's normal! But if you react defensively and shut down other people's constructive criticism or questions, those people will probably not want to be open with you in the future. Instead, listen to their feedback and take time to respond to it thoughtfully. Other people are giving you the chance to improve when they give you their honest thoughts. For example, if you ask your boss to honestly evaluate your work, s/he will probably give you some information about your shortcomings. It may be difficult to hear, but remember that accepting criticism (and learning from it) is just another part of transparent communication.

- **Be accountable.** Nobody's perfect! When you're communicating openly and honestly, it's important to accept responsibility for all of your decisions. That means being accountable for what you say to others. For example, if a supervisor tells an employee that s/he can take Friday off, the supervisor should not go back on her/his word and change her/his mind later. Accountability also includes being responsible for your mistakes. If a transparent person messes up at work, s/he doesn't just brush it under the rug and hope no one notices. Instead, s/he comes clean and admits his/her mistake.

Summary

Techniques to foster open, honest communication include listening, telling the whole truth, communicating consistently, being construc-tive, being polite, not sharing confidential information, asking and encouraging questions, not being defensive, and being accountable.

TOTAL RECALL

1. Identify techniques used to foster open, honest communication.