

## **WORK IT RIGHT! - #3 Improving Relationships On and Off the Job**

**by Gini Graham Scott**

### **THE GREAT COMMUNICATOR – NOT!**

Sometimes people who think they're great communicators aren't. They think they are clear and concise. So when someone doesn't understand what they said or makes a mistake following their instructions, they think the other person should have understood. As one researcher reported, the people who were clueless were also clueless that they were clueless, so they remained poorly informed. They were unaware they didn't have the knowledge but acted as if they did.

Jimmy discovered this problem first-hand, when assigned to work on several research projects with Dan, his team leader. When Dan instructed Jimmy to write up his findings, he told him to "echo back" what he found in previous research reports. But when Jimmy asked for clarification – what did "echo back" mean? -- Dan replied brusquely: "Just mirror it back." Then, he headed to a meeting.

Though Jimmy invited Dan to review the first few pages of his report to see if he was on the right track, Dan turned him down, telling him "Just send me the whole project when you're done." However, when Jimmy did, Dan complained the report was much too long, since by "echo back," he had meant for Jimmy to summarize and paraphrase. And he didn't remember Jimmy's offer to review the first page, telling Jimmy firmly, "You didn't ask me that." Though Jimmy knew otherwise, since Dan was his boss, he backed down.

Soon after, another communication breakdown came when Dan asked Jimmy to do some library research and keep him posted on the progress. So every few days, Jimmy submitted a few pages for review, along with his hours for each day. But when Jimmy turned in his last report with his total hours listed, Dan blew a fuse. "How did this suddenly get to 24 hours?" he yelled, claiming Jimmy had put in too many hours without telling him. Though Jimmy protested he had kept him informed, Dan was equally firm he hadn't.

Then, Jimmy began to notice that other team members were having similar misunderstandings about what to do, yet Dan was in charge. Thus, though Jimmy kept trying to do his best, he felt a growing resentment that Dan repeatedly blamed him for things that weren't his fault and accused him of not listening, understanding, or remembering. So after a time, Jimmy stopped protesting, not wanting to rock the boat and risk his job in a tight economy.

What should you do in such a situation, when you come up against a boss or client who thinks he or she is a good communicator, but isn't? Besides quitting the job or the client, find alternate ways to seek clear communications. For example, send a memo or e-mail stating what you understand you are supposed to do. If you think a job description is too vague or could have alternate meanings, feed back your understanding of the task in different and more precise words. Break down a task description into the steps you plan to do to make sure you are doing the task correctly. Also, seek feedback when you start on a new project, even if the other person says that's not necessary, explaining that this information will help you do better a job. Or diplomatically seek out another source of the information and directions. These various

strategies will help to reduce the break-downs on a sometimes rocky communications road.

**Today's Take-Aways:**

- People who think they're good communicators, may not get the message when you tell them they're not.
- To improve communications with a clueless poor communicator, put up more clear direction signs to guide the way.
- Slow down and stop to get feedback and make sure you're on the right road.

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