



Book Corner ~ *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*; by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey

How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work is a book that you may find useful in a variety of ways. If you are someone who is working to help people, teams or organizations change, this book will teach you a tool that could be a great help to you. As an individual you may find help for making a personal change or help in understanding why a change hasn't occurred.

After asking you to look at current complaints, Kegan and Lahey's model guides you through understanding the commitments you have made and then your responsibility for not having reached the commitments. Further analysis reveals other commitments that compete with those original ones. Finally, you are guided to look at the underlying assumptions that keep you from achieving your commitments. This whole process can work with an individual or a group.

What we like about Kegan and Lahey's approach is that it goes beyond the basic steps of identifying a problem and creating a set of actions to solve it. It's frustrating when the actions aren't implemented. By going deeper, as this model demonstrates, you can put together plans that have a much better chance of actually being completed and solving the real problem. (Dave uses this model successfully in his work - see page 3.)



Role Clarification

Question:

Our team has not spent time defining the role of each team member. I'm wondering if that might be some of what's causing the conflict we are currently experiencing.

Collaborations Response

Role clarity is indeed important in teams. While it may not be the entire reason underlying your conflict, we suspect it is a contributing factor. To share some insights about this topic, we will draw on a personal experience Susan had this summer.

My sister, Carol, learned in May that she was to have major back surgery in July. Very quickly key members of the family got involved in the planning of hospital time and recovery at home. Diane (sister on the East coast), Mom (lives with Carol in California), my husband, Dave, and I all were to be included in helping.

It became clear to me early on that role clarity was going to be needed. Diane was calling to find out how she could help, Mom was offering lots of suggestions, I had clear ideas on how to do things, and of course, Carol had her own plan.

So, Carol (the leader of the group, since the impact was greatest on her) formed "Team: Fusion." She created clear roles for each of us based on our strengths. Mom was in charge of safety, nutrition and comfort (Mom would stay at the hospital with Carol the entire 2 weeks). Diane was in charge of hospitality and communications for Week 2. I was in charge of logistics, problem solving and communications for Week 1. Dave was

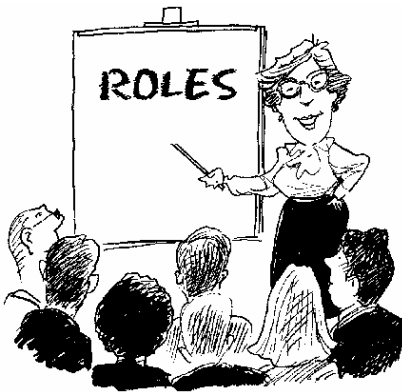
Kegan and Lahey's model guides you through understanding the commitments you have made and then your responsibility for not having reached the commitments.

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Communications

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the transportation coordinator and financial advisor. Other friends and family members had roles of backup support and encouragement.

This may sound like overkill for a family situation, but we found it extremely

useful. First of all, once Mom had a clear role, she focused on that and didn't get overwhelmed trying to solve all of the problems. Diane and I were able to talk with each other about how we would share the communication role, and Dave planned how to get 4 of us to the hospital (45 minutes from Carol and Mom's house) and have the right vehicles available when we needed them.

When the event arrived, we got off to a great start. We worked well together and were able to easily adapt to things we hadn't planned for. As we learned Carol's needs after surgery, we picked up additional roles like managing visitors and taking care of each other (Carol wasn't the only one who needed to be eating right and getting enough sleep).

An interesting aspect of our working together was when Diane arrived for the second week and second surgery. We had planned a one-day overlap and we used it well. I was able to share with Diane how we were managing

phone calls and how to do the daily e-mail update that I had been sending to a list of over 75 people each day. We called our process "transition leadership" and in fact transferred the overall leadership of the situation to Diane from me. While Carol was still "team leader," from a practical perspective we'd learned that someone had to be managing things that could interfere with Carol's healing.

After the hospital stay, we transitioned roles again. Carol was facing 4 months in bed, so roles continued to be important. Diane and I visit when we can, but Mom is with Carol 24 hours a day. So, Mom picked up many more activities within her areas of nutrition and comfort as well as new roles involving finances, logistics and more. Carol and Mom hired a caregiver who comes each day and has specific jobs related to her role of care giving. Carol is recovering well and picked up the communications role, taking care of e-mail and phone calls.

So, what are the key things you can take from our experience

- Have a conversation about roles -- clarify who has ultimate responsibility for what.
- Be prepared to adapt roles as unidentified challenges or opportunities emerge.
- Revisit roles and make transitions as appropriate (new phase of the project, changing membership, etc.)
- And finally, even if you think it's a simple situation, clarity is always useful.

Case Study: *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*

by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey

"We're stuck." With that statement a department's leadership team recently told Dave of several issues with which they continually wrestle. Perhaps you also have issues which seem to be recurring problems on your team; issues you've identified, made plans to resolve, worked on, but in spite of all your efforts the issue persists. It seems to have a "mind of its own!" You might find this helpful.

The book Susan reviewed in this issue, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* may hold some keys to progress with these recurring issues. Dave recently used the book's approach with a "stuck" leadership team. Briefly here's how it went:

The group's recurring issue was the amount, quality and accuracy of information being passed and received through their various communications processes. There were problems which stemmed from "poor communications" in various ways.

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The team had tried many ways to improve their communications processes. However, nothing seemed to adequately address the issue. The team agreed that they were all committed to the value and importance of good, clear, frequent and open communications. Dave then asked the team, “What is it that you do, or that you do *not* do, that keeps this commitment from being fully realized?” A short list of their responses follows:

1. do not read or respond to e-mail on a timely basis
2. do not share all aspects of current projects
3. sometimes withhold some details
4. give incomplete answers to questions asked
5. often don’t have the information necessary
6. often don’t anticipate questions or problems

Normally we would immediately begin to resolve these issues. After all, this is a perfect list of problems seeking corrective activities. For example, for the problem of not reading or responding to e-mail on a timely basis, a group might agree to “get to our e-mail four times a day.”

However, discussion with the team showed that all the problems on the list had been identified previously and that they had agreed to corrective action before. Yet here they were again!

So, rather than leap to immediately recreate solutions one more time, Dave asked the team to consider the following question: Might there be other commitments implied or indicated by this list of things we do or do not do to more fully realize good, clear, frequent, and open communications? In other words what might there be that is important, or of high value, to which we are also committed that would produce the above list of responses?

Discussion yielded clear commitments to items on the list. The commitments were completely valid, and in fact admirable. However, they were in direct competition with the initial commitment to “good, clear, frequent, and open communications.”

For items 1 & 6 the competing commitment was: “to spend the quality time I find necessary to give my own job the attention I think it demands.” For items 2, 3, 4 & 5 the competing commitment was: “to provide accurate information to the best of my ability.”

In fact, the list of problems was being held in *dynamic tension* between equally valid commitments which were in opposition to each other. For example, a commitment “to spend the quality time I find necessary to give my own job the attention I think it demands” meant that I could not always be doing “timely reading

or responding to e-mail,” nor spend much time to “anticipate a number of *what if* questions or *possible* problems.”

Likewise, a commitment “to provide accurate information to the best of my ability” meant not being able to “share all aspects of current projects” *in cases where I wasn’t sure of or didn’t know the accuracy of information*. Giving “incomplete answers to questions asked” was an issue *since I didn’t have or wasn’t sure of a more complete response*.

So the team was “stuck!” There were equally important commitments holding the list of identified issues in dynamic tension. The only way to get unstuck and actually improve “good, clear, frequent, and open communications” would be to lessen the strength of the competing commitments thus moving the list of problems toward solutions. But, what might be behind these competing commitments?

That led Dave to have the team finish these two statements:

1. I assume that if I do not “spend the quality time I find necessary to give my own job the attention I think it demands,” then....
2. I assume that if I do not “provide accurate information to the best of my ability,” then...

Completing these statements yielded revealing insight into assumptions the members of the team identified to be their reality. These assumptions were in fact their reality. Now the team could see their realities, get some distance on them, discuss them and consider how accurate those realities might really be.

The team completed the statements as follows:

1. I assume that if I do not “spend the quality time I find necessary to give my own job the attention I think it demands,” *then... my job is at risk and I may be fired.*
2. I assume that if I do not “provide accurate information to the best of my ability,” *then... I will be severely reprimanded, and may be judged to be incompetent.*

Now the team was able to discuss many aspects of their “big assumptions.” Discussions ensued around different approaches to doing their own jobs; what exactly their jobs demanded; what part and importance the exchange of information might really play in the definition of their jobs; that perhaps information whose accuracy was not 100% certain, could be shared with that caveat, etc.

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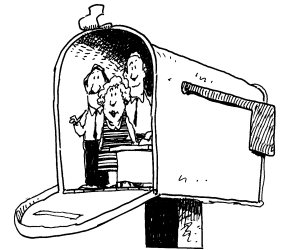


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Although it was not possible to immediately drop their realities (big assumptions) about their jobs, the discussions allowed them to see that there were other realities which certainly might be valid. Over time, they were able to make some changes in their assumptions (realities) which in fact did allow them to move toward more “good, clear, frequent and open communications.”

e-mail

In our last issue we shared 2 keys to effectively using e-mail. In this issue, we are sharing additional keys. If you have an e-mail key that you think works particularly well, send an e-mail to sgerke@att.net. We'll incorporate those keys that we can.



e-mail Key #3

If you only have a short message include 1L: on your subject line. This means “one-liner” and tells the reader that the entire message is in the Subject line.

Example: Subject: 1L: I'll meet you at 2pm in conference room A.

e-mail Key #4

Keep your e-mail messages to one page. Research shows that most people won't scroll past one page except in rare situations.

e-mail Key #5

It's very easy for someone to forward your note to a very large number of people. Before you send your note, ask yourself, “Would I like this to be broadcast on the PA System?” If the answer is “no,” you may want to place a phone call instead.

We'd Like to Hear From You

Do you have a question for us or a topic you would like us to write about? We'd love to hear from you. Send an e-mail to sgerke@att.net with your question or ideas. We can't respond to each individually, however we will respond in *Collaborations* based on topics most requested.