



Turn Signals and Talk Signals

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In the same way not using a turn signal can frustrate other drivers, failing to use language to clearly convey your intent equally confounds listeners. This lack of clarity may lead to road rage or accidents on the road and, in workplace conversations, can result in confusion, missed opportunities, or even dismissal.

We have all experienced the driver in front of us who does not signal his or her intent by using a turn signal well before making a turn or changing lanes. In the chapter "Letting Others Know What You Are Doing" of the Washington Driver Guide, a turn signal is to be initiated at least 100 feet prior to a change in direction. In the case of changing lanes, I frequently experience a driver drifting over into my lane only to signal at the last possible moment. Why is this? What made the use of a turn signal so difficult or seem unnecessary?

A national survey conducted by an insurance company in 2005 found that 57 percent of drivers admit they do not use their turn signal. Respondents claimed they do not have enough time, are lazy, would forget to turn it off, change lanes too frequently to bother, or it is not important. Have we become less sensitive to the needs of those around us--even if it means risking the safety of ourselves and others?

Letting others know what we are doing or intending to do is perhaps just as important when trying to communicate with someone in the workplace. Think about a recent challenging relationship you had with an employee, co-worker or supervisor. When you speak with this person, how often does he or she really know your intention? Does this lack of transparency on your part lead to misunderstanding, conflict, or worse?

Much of our communication today is conveyed via email, text messaging, and clipped cell phone calls and these conversations are extremely condensed. It is easier than ever to misunderstand another's intent because the message delivery is more cryptic, coded, and abbreviated than ever before. Do emoticons help or only add to the confusion? The Subject line in an email message can certainly be helpful. Yet nonverbal clues are unable to assist us in decoding what has been stated. Without facial expressions, eye



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movements, tone of voice, and other body language, it is extremely easy to misunderstand or misinterpret the message being sent. So what is to be done?

I have four suggestions that can be used and they should be conducted face-to-face whenever a communication breakdown is likely to occur.

1. State your intention clearly and directly. Ensure that the person you are delivering the message to understands why you are saying what you are saying. For example: "I've noticed that you've often been late to our staff meetings the past few months." State specific behavioral information based on what you have observed. Next express your intent behind this. "I am concerned because this causes us to delay the start of the meetings."

2. Look at the situation from the receiver's perspective. The response might be: "Well, I try to get here on time, but I'm very busy these days." Try to put yourself in his or her shoes by understanding the context from which your message is being delivered. What is this person's mood, frame of mind, environment which could impact his or her ability to understand what is being said?

3. Use paraphrase to aid understanding. Ensure that you hear what the other person is saying by repeating back what you've heard. "What I hear you saying is that you are very busy and you are trying to be on time." This will verify that you heard correctly. It will also demonstrate empathy to the other person and keep them engaged in listening to you.

4. Seek a win-win conclusion. Next you might state a personal statement as to why it matters. "It's important to me that we are all here on time. Is there something I can do to help you make it to these meetings on time so that we don't waste all of our time?" This makes it clear that you want to be a part of the solution.

Obviously, these four steps need not be used in every instance. However, using them when communication has gotten off-track can be the difference between clearly communicating and seriously derailing a conversation.

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