

INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

LEADERS & SUCCESS

How To Make Sure Your Message Is Heard Loud And Clear



Putting agreements down in writing can help avoid disputes inside a company.
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It doesn't matter what your preferred communication style is, it's not about you. If you're speaking in a way that people can't understand or that offends them, your message will not get across.

That's from Anna Conrad, founder of development and consulting firm Impact Leadership Solutions.

Attorney Damian L. Albergo of the law firm Cole Schotz adds that the power of simply spelling things out in writing at the outset can save the headache of a business dispute.

Tips on making sure your message is received loud and clear:

Think before speaking. Be cognizant of the intent of your words and the reactions of others, Conrad emphasizes.

"Avoid the temptation to think out loud," she said. "Ask questions before you give your opinion."

Walk in their shoes. Conrad, author of "(R)evolution: One Man's Leadership Journey," paraphrases business guru Stephen Covey in saying "we judge ourselves by our intent, but others judge us by our actions." She says you can only say "I'm sorry" or "I didn't mean that" so many times before people stop listening.

"Most people don't mean to be jerks," Conrad said. "Most people don't even realize when their behavior has crossed the line. And if you asked them, they will often complain that others are too sensitive. After all, it's just business. But aren't people a main part of a business? Without people there would be no business and no leaders."

Determine your role. In order to communicate effectively in business, Conrad says, it's important for people to understand when they are functioning as practitioners (those doing the work), as managers (those coordinating it), or as leaders (those looking at the bigger picture, being visionary and developing people).

She's found that for most people the comfort zone is as a practitioner, and that's not always a positive. "Although a manager may think rolling up her sleeves motivates her direct reports by showing she is part of the team, this may send the message that she doesn't trust them."

Conrad advises that you determine your role by what's needed in a given situation: a practitioner, a manager or a leader.

Spell it out. Conflict is a given, even in the most well-run businesses, Albergo says. He recommends taking a proactive, written approach to communication to help reduce costly intracompany disputes.

That includes executing a written operating agreement with a partner or partners that "describes how the business will be managed and includes mechanisms for resolving disputes should partners become deadlocked," he said.

Clarify financial compensation. Since business partners often provide seed money to get their ventures off the ground, "defining how that money will be treated — whether it is a capital contribution or a loan — is crucial," Albergo said.

If, for example, the seed money is to be treated as a loan, "having a written promissory note spelling out the interest rate and repayment terms is beneficial," he added.

Define responsibilities. Some partners play an active role in the business while others act as silent ones.

Whether and to what extent a partner is involved in day-to-day operations should be spelled out in the company's governing agreement or elsewhere, Albergo says. "If a partner is to receive a salary and benefits in addition to profits interest, the amount of the salary and benefits should be spelled out in writing and agreed upon at the outset."

Anticipate the unexpected. Decide for example how the buyout of a partner who becomes disabled or a payout to the estate of a deceased partner will be handled, Albergo said.

"Investigate approaches to value the enterprise and select a valuation method that can be memorialized in the operating agreement," he added.

Keep things simple. Having worked with thousands of leaders, Conrad said that "almost all conflicts, misunderstandings, and missed deadlines come down to communication issues — usually between two people."