

Soft Skills at Work: Small communications errors can turn away customers

By Marcia Hall, For The Capital
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A couple weeks ago, I listened to a webinar and was immediately distracted by the presenter's speaking style.

In every statement she made, the inflection in her voice was higher at the end of the sentence, making it sound like she was asking a question.

This may seem like a minor characteristic not worth mentioning, much less writing about. But it diverted my attention and I didn't have a good impression of the presenter. The speaker seemed tentative, lacking in confidence, and not convinced about what she was saying.

There are several "small" communication errors like the one practiced by this presenter, and people are often unaware of their adverse effects. Take a look at three common mistakes that negatively affect how people are perceived in and outside the workplace.

1. Talking too fast while leaving phone messages.

How often have you had to replay a message because the person who left it rushed through the phone number or other important information? What was your reaction?

Perhaps it was one of frustration or annoyance because your time was wasted. You may have wanted to tell the person to slow down.

Think about how fast you speak on the phone. The following tips will make it easy for people hearing your messages:

Say your phone number or other pertinent information slowly.

State your name and phone number at the beginning of the call and repeat it at the end, giving the person time to get a pen and paper.

Spell your name and/or company if there is any possibility of confusion, particularly if you are leaving an e-mail address.

2. Saying you will get back to a person "shortly" and then not doing so.

More than likely you have phoned a person at a company and heard this message, "I'll return your call shortly." Then, you hear nothing for days or at all.

How do you react? It might be with irritation, or thoughts that the company is not responsive. Perhaps you take your business elsewhere.

Words such as "shortly" or "promptly" create an expectation. If this is something you practice, people may believe they will hear back from you in a few hours. When you don't call, your reputation can suffer because they may believe you are inattentive.

This applies to live interactions as well. Saying, "Please stay on the line and someone will be with you promptly," and then making the caller wait 15 or 20 minutes will only be aggravating to the caller.

Here are tips to remember:

Choose words carefully when creating a voice message.

If you are unable to respond soon, let callers know when they can expect to hear back from you.

Don't use the words "shortly" or "promptly" unless you actually will return the call or e-mail quickly.

3. Minimizing what you say by using "kind of" or "sort of."

On one of the weekend television news programs, a prominent journalist said, "They don't sort of, kind of, know."

How much more convincing would the statement have been if the journalist had said, "They don't know."

Toastmasters International meetings are famous for counting the number of times a speaker says "um," "ah," and "you know" in a presentation. After hearing a webinar recently where two speakers used "kind of" and "sort of" constantly, I believe those words should be monitored, as well.

Here is a sample of the statements they said:

"It moves us kind of to the third point."

"Here is kind of the big idea."

"That is sort of what we're here to talk about."

"Here are a few kind of final thoughts."

What is your impression of these speakers? Do their sentences project conviction and confidence?

The words "kind of" and "soft of" diminished the effectiveness of each statement they made. Remove those words and see if you agree that the sentences would be strengthened.

If you catch yourself using these words, make an effort to eliminate them to improve how you are perceived.

Countless employer surveys show that being able to communicate well, both verbally and in written form, is a top priority. The habits described above may seem minor, but the effect on others is often not.

CONNECT! Coalition

CONNECT! will host the Teen Workplace Skills Boot Camp, a half-day program for high school juniors and seniors, on April 17 at Anne Arundel Community College.

Students will attend three workshops about goal setting, listening skills, and how to succeed in the workplace. The boot camp will feature a "Dress for Success Do's and Don'ts" Fashion Show presented by the South River High School Theater Group.

For more information, contact Sue Gallagher with the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corp. at sgallagher@aawdc.org.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to stressing the connection of "soft skills" to workplace success, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

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