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Want to Communicate Better? Try Role Playing.

THE MEETING WAS A disaster. All you were trying to do was set a new timeline for the upcoming product release, but Jones stuck to the marketing team's agenda and willfully ignored any suggestions for alternative approaches. Nothing did nothing but demand more time to work the bugs out of the product, and Johnson, who has his own ideas about the timeline, just sat and liked.

It was a complete waste of time. But isn't there something you could have done to work with Jones, defuse Smith, and get Johnson to share his ideas in a productive way?

Fortunately, there is. The best communication happens when each person understands the others' perceptions and biases. And a great way to get inside her people's heads is through role playing, a technique borrowed from the theatre that allows participants to act in situations from various perspectives. The fundamental advantage of role playing, says Jim Osterhaus, a clinical psychologist and senior consultant with the Armstrong Group (Fairfax, Va.), is that it shows, rather than tells. "When you see something acted out, it brings into play other parts

of the brain. You not only hear it in words, but see and experience it."

It's a lot like learning to play golf, Osterhaus observes. If you want to learn to swing a club, the best way to do it is to watch someone else. "That's what makes role play more powerful—you're giving a person the experience instead of telling him about it. Language loses something," he says.

Establishing trust

Role playing isn't easy. Many people are intimidated by it and end up sitting passively during the exercise. "I've seen many sessions that look like plays with large audiences," says Susan Wilson, president of Executive Strategies, Inc. (Newton, Iowa). That's not surprising, she says, since many people, especially executives, don't want to be put on the spot, but it ruins the value of role play. "Spectators don't feel any ownership."

The key to success is establishing trust, says June Cline, a humorist and president of The Court Jesters Club (Kennesaw, Ga.). Participants have to "trust

themselves and the environment they're in. If there's no trust, you have to back up and find out why. That's a whole different seminar."

Walking in each other's shoes

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ships. One common problem is dealing with a difficult employee or colleague. In such cases, role playing can provide perspective, says Wilson. She uses a "walk in each other's shoes" technique that she says can help the two people see eye to eye.

In the exercise, the two individuals separately record their skills and abilities, as well as their attitudes and behavior toward the other person. Next, they write down what they think the other person's perceptions are. The two participants then discuss their answers in the presence of a moderator. They consider the misperceptions that came up and how they may have come about.

Finally, "each person makes a written commitment to three specific changes to improve communication so that the working relationship can be more effective," says Wilson.

Use role playing by yourself

Not all role playing has to be done in a crowded room, or even with one other person. Realistically, it may be impossible to get coworkers or team members to participate in such an exercise. "A lot of people might resist role playing because it's contrived," says Rick Kirschner, a consultant and trainer based in Ashland, Ore. But that doesn't mean you can't benefit from role playing. You can use variations of these techniques to work out issues in the priv-

acy of your own head. Here are two suggestions:

1. **Instant replay.** Kirschner advocates replaying disappointing encounters like the product launch meeting mentioned above, and trying to figure out better ways to handle the situation. For example, considering the timeline from

Jones's point of view could give you insight on how to discuss the marketing issues in a constructive way in light of the big picture.

2. **"What would Katharine do?"** Kirschner recommends drawing on the example of someone you admire. He recalls a secretary whose boss was making unreasonable demands on her time. She didn't feel comfortable standing up to him, but the stress of the situation was beginning to affect her health. In her mental exercises, says Kirschner, "she allowed Katharine Hepburn to deal with her boss and observed how she would do it. Pretty soon her confidence level went up. Little by little that behavior started showing up in her interactions with her boss."

Seeing your company through your customers' eyes

One of the problems of the modern organization is that managers don't view the company from the customer's perspective, says Ron Huddleston, president of TFRC, a management and fundraising consulting company in San Francisco. When he works with a non-profit company to improve its operations, he says, "I'll send a small donation and watch the process. Did I get a letter back thanking me? How long did it take to get my name on the contribu-

tors' board?" Experiencing it yourself is the best way to determine whether a process is working smoothly.

He suggests managers do the same. As an example, he cites one of the most unpopular trends in customer service today—the automated dial-in service.

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Call a customer support line, and you get a list of options that are theoretically designed to speed up service. If you're calling a telephone company, for instance, there's a good chance you'll be asked to enter your phone number before you get to talk to someone. But when you do reach a human being, he or she promptly asks for your number again. "Why did you enter the number in the first place? If you ask, they'll tell you it's for security purposes. But what's the difference between you entering the number and them asking you in person? They'll tell you they don't know," Huddleston says.

Such problems are invisible to tech support managers because they can't see their operation from the customer's perspective. "Role playing would show managers how ridiculous these things are. If you are really concerned about improving your customer service, you should play the role of the customer in evaluating yourself," says Huddleston.

Whether you choose to deal with Jones, Smith, and Johnson by handling them the way Katharine Hepburn would, or through the techniques of improvisational comedy (see sidebar), or some other method, you need to practice.

Like learning to play guitar, sharpening interpersonal skills is something you should work on every day, says Cherie

Kerr of Santa Ana, Calif.-based ExecuProv. "I ask clients to rehearse every day...they can take 15 minutes a day to practice listening skills, to be more positive with people." She even suggests using routine short meetings to hone skills for the more intense variety. "You almost step outside of yourself and say, 'this is rehearsal time.' Other people won't even know what you're doing. And then when you're done, write down what you noticed."

If the shy member of the group came out of his shell as a result of some of the things you said, or the aggressor backed off and became more compromising, you've got strategies you can use in the future. "Over time you can go back and reflect on that diary. Later, you can go back and try the approaches that seem to work," says Kerr. □

—JIM KLING

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Learning to stay in the moment

The business world could learn a lot from improvisational comedy, a form in which actors create spontaneous comedy sketches in response to audience suggestions. "When you study improv, it takes a lot of discipline. You always have to stay in the moment," says Cherie Kerr, founder and director of ExecuProv (Santa Ana, Calif.), an original member of the Los Angeles improv comedy troupe L.A. Groundlings, and now a communications consultant for Fortune 500 companies. The inability to stay in the moment often haunts people in their interpersonal communications, she adds. In a meeting, for example, many people will focus on the eventual goals of the meeting and not on what people are saying right then and there.

In improv, as in business encounters, "you [want to] create a beginning, get to the middle, and then resolve the scene," she says. One way to do that is through the improv principle of adding information. In her book *"When I Say This..." "Do You Mean That?" Enhancing On-the-Job Communication Skills Using the Rules and Tools of the Improv Comedy Player* (ExecuProv Press, 1999), Kerr illustrates the idea using a scene. Suppose one actor slams a door. Another actor might slam two doors, and the first might respond by knocking over a table. The first one responds by throwing a lamp, and this time her partner catches it. "Nice catch!" "Well, catch this!" And the actor throws a couch. And the scene goes on until it reaches some natural conclusion. In each instance, the actor played off the suggestion of the other, adding information to move the scene along.

That principle can help guide unruly meetings. You probably don't want to slam doors or throw lamps, but you can try elaborating on what was just said to see if it takes you in a productive direction. The technique can help develop other communication skills. Kerr cites the example of a hotel manager who found it very difficult to act as a host, as he was often required to do at banquets or meetings. "He wasn't necessarily shy, but he felt awkward making small talk. It felt phony to him—he really hated it," she recalls.

Her suggestion? Use the improvisational comedy technique of picking up the end of the line that's just been heard, and adding something simple to it. Kerr had the man role play conversations using this device. "That way he wasn't thinking about a 45-minute conversation, he just took it step by step. Pretty soon we got this nice conversation flow going."