

EPISODE 4:

3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

- [CC] Welcome to episode 4 of Engagement Matters. My name is Christina Canters and I am joined by Mr. John Williams. Let's dive straight into this episode. We are talking all about the three powerful, yet poorly executed communication tools. John, what are they?

- [JW] They're pretty obvious, really. The first one is questions. The second one is listening. And the third one is silence. They're also obvious and we've been doing it since we could walk and talk, but not very well.

- [CC] Okay. So in this episode, John is gonna share with you how you can effectively use these things in order to increase the level of engagement that you have with your colleagues and stakeholders and to get better results, right?

- [JW] Better results is what this is all about.

- [CC] Build better relationships. How else will it affect people's work and relationships with others?

- [JW] You start having shorter meetings and get better outcomes, that's what it's all about, is getting straight to the point, getting the information you need. And making the other people feel more comfortable with where you're going.

- [CC] And you mentioned meetings in there. We talked about planning meetings effectively in episode 1, so if you haven't listened to that, make sure you go back and listen to episode 1 where John gives a really excellent outline for how you can better plan your meetings in order to be more productive. I guess, this episode is kind of a follow one in that.

- [JW] In some of the techniques you execute better.

- [CC] Exactly, perfect, all right. Now, if you want to download the PDF resource for this episode, you can find it in the show notes at JHW.com.au/tools. We'll put it in JHW.com.au/tools, there'll be a PDF there that you can send to other people who you feel would also benefit from this content. Alrighty, let's get into it. The first one that we're gonna talk about is questions. Tell me, John, why is it so important that we learn how to ask great questions?

- [JW] Okay, good. There's five things about questions that make them really valuable to us. They're our best friend, they really are. In any meeting with stakeholders, when we're a service provider of any sort, questions are our best friend for five good reasons. Number one, they help us gather the information we're looking for, that's probably pretty obvious. If I want to know how much budget you've got, I ask you. And hopefully, I'll gather that information.

The second thing is, by asking questions we can create dialogue, get an interaction going. Until we get that interaction going, we don't really have a meeting. The way of me passing back over to you the initiative to talk is by asking the question. We often talk about two ears and one mouth, if I'm gonna get you talking twice as much as I do, then I need to be asking you good questions that gets that dialogue going.

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

A third good value that comes out of questions is the rapport that it generates. People love talking about themselves, their jobs, how important they are, what a great job they're doing. If I'm doing most of that during a meeting, then I'm coming out feeling really great, but my stakeholder, yourself, is probably not feeling so thrilled.

If I instead of that can get you telling me about how good you are and how important you are and what a great job you're doing, you can have that meeting feeling somewhat uplifted, feeling that somebody is there listening to you. That's a third great thing that comes out of good questions.

A fourth thing, gaining commitment. If I want you to agree to a plan of action that I'm proposing, sign off on a milestone or an order or something like that. There's only one way I'm gonna get that and that's by asking a question of you. In this case, it needs to be a closed question.

But again, unless I ask you that question, I'm not gonna get the outcome I'm looking for. So, "Are we gonna have another appointment?", "Would you be prepared to sign off on this milestone?", "Are you prepared to sign the order?" That requires a question. If we're gonna get the things that we're trying to get from a meeting, we need to ask questions.

The fifth thing that is really great about questions and probably as important or more important than any of the others is that by asking questions, I can control the meeting. If you start taking the meeting off on a red herring, taking it down a track that I don't want it to go, the best way of me bringing it back on track is by asking you another question that brings it back to where I want the meeting to go. For me, that's five damn good reasons why questions are really useful for us.

- [CC] Can you share how we can ask better questions? I know there is so much to it and we only have so much time on this podcast, what's maybe your number one tip for knowing what questions to ask?

- [JW] Preparation. Preparation. Understating what you're trying to achieve during the meeting, and thinking through the questions that are gonna help you achieve that. If you're trying to get dialogue going, if you're trying to get a stakeholder talk about what it is they're trying to achieve or where they are trying to go, then we need to be asking them open questions, who, what, where, when, how, why.

Those questions demand more than a one-word answer and that's how we get dialogue going. If instead, we're trying to get commitment, then we need to ask a closed question. I'm pushing you to make a yes/no decision here. Are you gonna sign off on this milestone, yes or no?

So, thinking and preparing in advance what we're trying to achieve and relating the questions, making sure we ask the questions in the right context to achieve the outcomes that we're trying to get to.

- [CC] It's so important to consciously think about these things 'cause like you said right at the start of this episode, we ask questions all the time, but we really stop to think about what is the question we're actually asking and is it gonna help me get to my goal?

- [JW] Exactly.

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

- [CC] Yeah. I mean, that's what at the start of every podcast episode that we record. We ask the question what's the goal that we're trying to achieve with this single episode and as a result of that, what questions should I be asking. It applies to everything, really. Okay, so that's questions. What was the next thing, listening.

- [JW] Listening, yeah. Not much point in asking a question if you're not gonna listen to the answer.

- [CC] Tell us, it probably sounds obvious to most people, but tell us why is listening so important?

- [JW] It's important because it's difficult. We can train ourselves to ask good questions, it's hard to train ourselves to be good listeners. How many times have you Christina, been introduced to somebody for the first time and within 3 nanoseconds of being introduced to them, suddenly realized that you didn't catch their name.

- [CC] Yeah. I always, I don't know why, is it because I don't listen or I just forget. Is that related to my bad listening?

- [JW] It's a symptom of bad listening and we all do it. One of the reasons we do it is because we're so preoccupied with what we want to say to make a good impression on this new person that we're meeting, that our brain is totally occupied on thinking through what we're saying, so we hear, but don't listen to the key thing which was their name.

And it happens quite often. I found a technique to help overcome that, is to repeat that back to them. "So, it's Christina, is it, nice to meet you, Christina." If I've said it twice, at least I know it's in my brain somewhere, now all I've got is a problem with retrieval. Sometimes we didn't even get it into the brain because we were so intensely thinking about what we were gonna say to impress them.

- [CC] If you think about whenever you drift off when someone's talking and you stop listening, it's generally because you're thinking about something else, right? You're thinking about something that's a bit more interesting, so you're more focusing on you and what you want rather than them.

- [JW] And that is a danger that we all face. It could be because the other person is a little boring. It may be because simply our brain is able to process things far faster than what people speak. So if we talk at about a hundred words per minute, the brain can process about ten times that much. Which gives us 90% of our capacity to go think about other things.

Often that's what I'm gonna say next. It can often be provoked because of assumptions or expectations that we've had. I hear you're starting a sentence and I think, "Ah, I know what she's gonna say." And so I assume you've said that and I've stopped listening to what you're saying, assuming I've already pigeonholed that, know what she's gonna say, now I can focus on what I'm gonna say and then without realizing it, you end up saying something different.

- [CC] And then do people then act on or respond according to what they think or assume was going to be said?

- [JW] Absolutely.

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

- [CC] That's when communication breakdown happens.

- [JW] Exactly, exactly. It's not unusual for two people, two good communicators even, to leave a meeting with a totally different opinion of what the outcome of that meeting was. We like to talk about active listening, how can we listen better? One point is to just concentrate a bit harder, let's focus on the other person.

That's, eyeball them, make sure that we're giving them plenty of eye-contact and just in our brain, keep reinforcing this idea, I need to listen to all of what this person has got to say even if I think I already know what they're going to say. It's sometimes a slight nuance, a slight difference in phrase, might turn our understanding of what they were truly saying.

Another really good technique is to paraphrase afterwards. Once I've got you to talk about what it was you're gonna tell me. I'm now gonna paraphrase back to you what I think you've said. When I do that, you have the opportunity to confirm whether I've fully understood what you've said or not.

- [CC] To confirm what you said.

- [JW] What you said.

- [CC] You see what I did there?

- [JW] Yes, you did.

- [CC] I don't think I did it right, but I'm trying.

- [JW] So, paraphrasing gives that opportunity to ensure that what I thought you said is what you meant to say. But it also does a couple of other things. It ensures to you that I truly care about understanding properly. It helps build that trust and rapport, that John was so diligent in trying to understand what I said, that he paraphrased it back to me. That sends a signal to the stakeholder that I truly care. And that can be really important. Another thing it does is provoke in a stakeholder's mind some thinking about whether they've given me the full answer.

In some of the complex discussions we're having, without intending to, our stakeholder can sometimes give us half or two thirds of the story and through no intent omit important parts. I've asked a question about what the stakeholder is trying to achieve and they give me A, B and C. When I paraphrase back to them that I understood what you meant by discussion was A, B, and C, they're hearing it for the first time.

They've said it before, but they're hearing it for the first time. And when they hear it, they suddenly realize they haven't given us the full story, and you have experienced this in the past and hopefully you will experience it again, when you paraphrase and say what I think you meant was, A, B and C, they'll say "Yeah, that's right." "But what I forgot to tell you was also D, E and F." Now, there's every chance that you're not gonna find out about D, E and F unless you paraphrase what they said in the first place. It's a great technique for generating additional information.

- [CC] You've said before where I've said, of where I've had a whole discussion with potential

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

client about what they wanted, and there was a lot of, a long discussion, so at the end I had to say, “Okay, so what I understand is you want three things, this, this and this, is that correct?” And then, sort of paraphrasing of what they’ve said, but more of it is a summary at the end and they said “Yeah, that’s exactly what we want, oh and also we wanted this.”

- [JW] There you go, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.

- [CC] I haven’t actually thought of that consciously.

- [JW] Yeah. That’s a form of active listening, trying to shift the focus away from thinking about what I’m gonna say next to truly listening to what the stakeholder is talking about.

- [CC] I’ve noticed that some people, sorry to interrupt, I’ve noticed that some people preempt what you’re gonna say and finish your sentence for you, have you ever encountered people like that?

- [JW] Sorry, I’ve been guilty of it myself. It’s very poor technique because often the stakeholder will agree with you even though that might not have been what they were gonna say. It leads us into the third point that I was gonna talk about which is use of silence. Abraham Lincoln once said “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak out and remove all doubt.” Clearly, he was saying, sometimes if you’ve got nothing to say, just don’t say it because you’re gonna make a fool of yourself otherwise, but it goes deeper than that.

There’s a whole lot of things that silence can help you with in communication. So often when we’re nervous perhaps during a presentation, you’ve observed this before with the people that you’ve coached, when people are nervous, they tend to start talking very quickly because they get nervous and they just want to get off the stage or they feel that they’re not important enough to be taking up too much of this important person’s time.

So, these are signs of nervousness. Taking planned pauses, just like I’m doing now can help remove that tension, that concern about, that feeling of nervousness. This person is confident enough to talk slowly, to live with pauses and work through. The same happens in an interactive discussion. If I give you a few seconds after you’ve finished answering a question, then you might actually carry on talking. And sometimes you’ll then tell me the stuff that maybe is a bit more important, maybe a bit more personal to you or maybe not the stuff that you really wanted to divulge.

- [CC] ‘Cause I’ve been given some space.

- [JW] Exactly. And put under a little bit of pressure as well actually. We get uncomfortable with silence, we have this norm in communication that I’m talking and when I finish talking, I send out verbal cues, tone of voice cues, body language cues that says “John is finished, it’s now Christina’s time to talk.” And then she talks and she sends out those same clues to John when she’s finishing talking. But if I ignore those clues and remain silent, uh panic happens, panic happens! Something is wrong here, he hasn’t started talking, so I must continue talking.

- [CC] I’ve got to fill in the silence. People do that when they’re presenting as well. They feel like they have to fill in every millisecond of silence.

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

- [JW] And often what you say when you're panicking and filling in silence is the very stuff that you didn't want to tell me. It's a way of eliciting information that sometimes the stakeholder didn't necessarily want to share with us. I think it needs to be used very careful because you can irritate people if they realize that you're doing this regularly, but sometimes it can be quite useful in understanding truly what the stakeholder's requirements are.

Using silence can also help detract from us spoiling good questions by being in too much of a hurry. Sometimes we ask very good open questions and when our stakeholder wants to pause for a few seconds to think about their answer, we can often assume that we've stumped them with this question, so maybe I need to help them out and we ask another question or try to clarify the question or turn an open question in a closed question. "Did you want to go left or right?"

This is quite insulting behavior really, it may well be that our stakeholder is perfectly in control of the question you asked and perfectly understands it, and is taking a few seconds to think through a considered answer rather than just shooting from the hip. And in us jumping in to clarify the question, we're essentially saying to them: "I guess you're too stupid to answer that question, so I'll rephrase it for you." Quite insulting.

- [CC] And you're also interrupting their train of thought when you do that.

- [JW] And you're gonna get the answer that you wanted, that you just planted into their mind rather than the one that they were solidly thinking through and were gonna give you, so you're probably gonna end up with inferior responses in any case.

- [CC] I've experienced this, I'm guilty of this when I'm interviewing people on my podcast, sometimes if I am a little bit nervous or I'm a bit unsure of what I'm asking, I'll find myself repeating that question over and over.

So I might say, "Tell me how you started your business, like, was it 'cause of this, or 'cause of that, did you do this, or at what point what was the story behind it?" And when I go back to edit it, I listen to myself going crazy asking these questions over and over and I think, "You're such an idiot, you could've just stopped there and paused and let the other person speak." Even if they do require a few moments of silence to get their thoughts together.

- [JW] That's a really good insight, Christina. At least in the podcast you have the opportunity of a second side, you get to listen to it through, you even have the opportunity to edit some of that out, I guess.

- [CC] Fantastic.

- [JW] But for most of us, in real, live meetings, we don't get to listen back to how the meeting went. We might be as guilty of that as you are, but we didn't notice it because we didn't get to listen to the podcast afterwards and we certainly don't get the opportunity to erase that little bit and try again. Our stakeholder that was in that meeting, witnessed, saw what happened and has gone away with an impression of it. And most times, that impression isn't very good when we've cramped their

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

space.

- [CC] It also applies the other way around 'cause I find this when people are asked questions, say if they're presenting or to a Q & A session, they're asked a question they have to feel like they have to jump in immediately with an answer and that's when they start to ramble and say "uhm" a lot, without properly thinking it through.

I always encourage people to, when they're asked a question, pause and take a moment to think about the answer instead of launching straight into it. Like you said before, otherwise you might say something that you regret later or give away too much information that you shouldn't have.

- [JW] Exactly. That pause is very valuable. When you pause, it gives you a few nanoseconds to construct a well-thought-through answer to the question rather than blurting. That may well be that the answer to the question is exactly the same if you hadn't paused, but it comes across a lot more considered and thought-through just for the fact that you were confident enough to take a pause and then answer the question constructively. It just makes you look more mature and much more in control.

- [CC] And hopefully the person asking the question doesn't freak out and start asking the question again and again and again, thinking that you didn't quite understand the question. Hopefully they give you the space as well to answer.

- [JW] If that starts happening, they you need to clarify that you've understood the question properly. Sometimes we can answer what we thought was the question, but miss the point, so rather than trying to answer the question again, it's always worth to ask the questioner, was that really what you were expecting, was that what you were really asking or if I understood the question properly?

- [CC] And saying, "does that answer your question?", at the end.

- [JW] Exactly.

- [CC] Getting confirmation. Fantastic. All right, we've covered quite a bit in this episode. We've talked about asking questions. Going back to questions again, how do we ask great questions, why it's important. We talked about listening, and how we can do that more effectively with active listening and we talked about using silence as a really effective tool.

And all of these things, like we've said at the start, we can all do them, they're all very simple things to do and we've been doing them all our lives, but unfortunately, a lot of us do them quite poorly. If you can start to implement these things and pay attention to them and improve with these things, you'll take huge steps in the effectiveness fo your overall communication.

- [JW] Absolutely right. I think one thing to leave our listeners with is if we have a miscommunication with a stakeholder, the cost of fixing that miscommunication increase with the time it takes to fix it. If I've misunderstood something you've just said, but I clarify that immediately during the meeting, and we fix it, then the cost is zero, or virtually zero, a few seconds.

EPISODE 4: 3 POWERFUL YET POORLY EXECUTED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

If I don't clarify it then and we go off and we spend another three months on this project working to that misinformation, then by the end of that project, in three months' time, it's hugely costly to

repair the error of communication at that point. These techniques to get better, clearer understanding are really valuable and saves us a lot of heartache later.

- [CC] Would you say that there's a linear relationship between the time and error in communication or would you say it's more exponential?

- [JW] I was gonna say it can be linear, but it can very quickly become exponential.

- [CC] Great and if you want to learn more about the public courses that John runs about stakeholder engagement, be sure to check them out at JHW.com.au and you can also find more information about what we've talked about today, including a PDF version that you can send to people who you feel that this would also benefit, but who may not listen to podcast. Oh, how dare they, you can find that at JHW.com.au/tools. Thanks again, John, this has been excellent.