2019

Effective Communication in Academia: It Goes Both ways!

Domenick Pinto
Sacred Heart University, pintod@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/computersci_fac
Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Higher Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Computer Science and Engineering at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Computer Science & Engineering Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu, lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.
Effective Communication in Academia:
It Goes Both ways!

Domenick J Pinto

MSCSIT Director,
School of Computer Science and Engineering,
Sacred Heart University
Fairfield, CT
At Sacred Heart University 42 years
5 years adjunct instructor of mathematics
3 years FT instructor of mathematics
34 years in computer science dept
Chairperson of Computer Science for 29 years
Director of new School of Computing for two years
“You are being extremely generous in offering me an orchard full of apple trees. There are a lot of advantages to apple orchards…think of all the pies and applesauce and baked apples you can have! But I really want ONE ORANGE TREE because I need to have orange juice… I need that tree. I would happily agree that you can give me fewer apple trees in exchange for that one orange tree. You see…you cannot get orange juice from an apple tree!”
The previous slide is a powerful analogy that I used to try obtain a certain type of position for my department. Although the request was denied a second time (I used this analogy to ask that my request be reconsidered ..and it was) I feel it was one of my BEST communication attempts. The request went to the dean and provost. I did not get the position requested but felt as though I was HEARD
“You have alienated the rest of the department with your meddling and destructive behaviors. It has become so difficult to work with you. I will continue to work with you when needed but want no further contact with you unless absolutely necessary”
Self Evaluation:
How well does one MIScommunicate

- The previous slide is an example of POOR communication skills. Rather than addressing the transgressions one by one in a calm, professional manner this became a problem that involved the dean and many other faculty members in the department.

- Although the faculty overwhelmingly supported the chair, the dean needed to step in in order to bring a peaceful solution….the situation was resolved and all became right with the world for about 10 minutes!
Self Evaluation:
How well do I MIScommunicate

Although the dean understood WHY this message was sent as an email, it was pointed out that a chair needed to stick with facts and not editorialize…. Oddly enough even though this was a very poor way of expressing oneself…the situation did eventually improve considerably…and has remained on neutral ground
At your tables........

- I have given you a copy of this scenario....
- Take 10 minutes as a group and construct an email or other means of communicating that would have been more appropriate and less threatening....
- We will share your approaches after 10 minutes....
My Communication Strengths

- Willingness to listen and hearing what the person is saying
- Thinking before responding
- Usually NOT letting emotions take over…for you OR the person you are communicating with
- Where possible meeting live to discuss…try not to use email if the situation is tentative or your responses are likely to be misconstrued. If possible do coffee or lunch
- Being as calm as possible (not always easy for an Italian)
- Being willing to compromise but not backing down every time
- Offering a follow up meeting
Active listening

EXERCISE
I will read aloud twelve words that are related....
After I finish write down as many words as you can remember in 2 minutes
Do NOT write until I am done....ALSO TRY TO FIGURE OUT WHICH WORD IS MISSING
We will then ask each table to the average number of words remembered
EXAMPLE
cat tiger lion wolf elephant cat fox panther horse cow parrot cat
All are animals.....what’s missing?
Communication: LISTENING
Essential Skills for Chairs

- Be willing to LISTEN to the faculty member
- Avoid the use of the word “you” and try to use “we” instead
- Make certain that the faculty member understands the “department’s” position and that you understand their position on the issue
- Help resolve the issue; compromise may be needed
- Be firm and strong if you need to be without showing anger
Receiving, Evaluating and Acting on complaints

- There are essentially three sources of complaints:
  - Fellow faculty and staff or dept
  - Administrators
  - Students

- Although listening well is an essential ingredient for trying to handle complaints, it does matter where the complaint comes from.
Complaints from dept members including staff

- Listen carefully and speak with a positive attitude while ascertaining the extent of the problem
- Avoid personal issues if possible
- Promise to investigate any problem areas but do NOT promise that the situation will be resolved
- Assess the seriousness of the situation
Complaints from dept members including staff..cont.

- Act promptly IF the situation is serious and may impact someone’s ability to function in the department
- Try to emphasize the mission of the department if possible
- Be sympathetic but not weak..always look for compromises
Three of the best students in the program come to you separately with complaints about one of your faculty’s classes. The students are all hard working, high achieving students who you know personally from classes you have taught them in. They complain that the professor plays favorites, in particular seems to favor those from a certain ethnic group and considers these three individuals disruptive and inconsiderate and tells them so. You speak with the professor, tactfully asking if there any issues with the class. The professor responds that he enjoys the class and the differences in viewpoints and composition of the class. In particular he commends the three students who came to you. You have a very good relationship with the professor and have not encountered these types of problems before in dealing with said professor.
What do you do next? Do you do anything?
Creative Thinking exercises as a way to stimulate thinking

Answer as creatively as possible.....in groups....report out in 10 minutes

1. Carl wins race after race, he is the fastest runner but wins no trophy..why?
2. There is a man who guesses the score of every football game before kick off. How can he do this?
3. How much dirt is in a round hole that is 7 feet deep with a diameter of 4.5 feet?
4. A cat jumps out a window of a 30 story apt building but lives. How?
5. It occurs once in a minute and once in an hour but never in a second. What is it?
6. A girl who was just learning to drive went down a one way street in the wrong direction but didn’t break the law. Why didn’t she?
Essentials of Effective Communication

- Be concise and to the point
- Remain as objective as possible
- Maintain transparency
- Keep to the situation….don't wander around or waiver
Essentials of Effective Communication

- Be firm but understanding
- Make sure you hear and that you are heard
- Repeat what you hear and ask the other party do the same
- Keep emotions in check
- Stop the conversation and ask to resume later if no progress is being made
Solving Problems ...
sooner rather than later

- Do not allow bad feelings to fester..make every attempt to address problems early
- If the problem involves several faculty members meet with each one separately as soon as possible before bringing them together
- Let people know you are willing to talk as soon as you perceive a problem
Solving Problems...sooner rather than later...cont.

- Do not prejudge
- Ask the faculty why they think this problem arose and if there is anything that they or you could have done to prevent it or make it less toxic
- Try to handle the problem without bringing in senior administration if possible...if necessary to do so let the other party know why
1. Identify Your Limits

The first step in setting boundaries is getting clear about what your limits are—emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, etc. You do this by paying increased attention to yourself and noticing what you can tolerate and accept as well as what makes you feel uncomfortable and stressed. These feelings will help you clarify your limits. It is important to remember that your limits are personal—your own—and therefore, they are likely to be different than the limits that others have.

Make an attempt to understand and get to know limits of your colleagues as well...don’t be afraid to discuss these.

Setting Boundaries

2. Pay Attention to Your Feelings

There are three key feelings that are often red flags or cues that you need to either set boundaries in a particular situation or that you are letting your boundaries slip (and not maintaining them). These feelings are (1) discomfort, (2) resentment, or (3) guilt. You can think of these feelings as cues to yourself that a boundary issue may be present. If a particular situation, person, or area of your life is leading you to feel uncomfortable, resentful, or guilty, and it has happened several times, this is an important cue. For example, resentment often develops from feelings of being taken advantage of or not being appreciated.
3. Give Yourself Permission to Set Boundaries

The biggest obstacles often experienced at some point, when considering setting a boundary, are the feelings of fear, guilt, and self-doubt--the anti-boundary musketeers--that show up. You might fear how the person will respond (e.g., angry, hurt) if you set and enforce your boundaries. You might feel guilty about speaking up or saying no to a colleague, administrator or student.

Often, people feel they should be able to cope with a situation and say yes, because that is what a good chairperson, dean, director or faculty member should do.
Let’s brainstorm about boundary issues and attempt to approach solutions to some of these. We will do these orally.
We are presented with 2 strong candidates for chair from within a department of 20 faculty. The department is very dynamic, entrepreneurial, noted for excellence in teaching, service to the university and scholarship. The department consists of 20 FT faculty of whom 8 are tenured, 6 are on tenure track and 6 are on term contracts. Both candidates are well respected and qualified but the department is split on who to select. Thus the dean and provost must decide……
A look at the candidates

**Candidate 1**
- 14 year member of department
- Very good teacher
- Good interpersonal skills and very approachable BUT somewhat reserved
- Extremely well liked and respected by faculty and administration…but can sometimes be easily swayed
- Moderately active in service and committee work
- Entrepreneurial
- Tenured
- Scholarship is truly outstanding
- Has some outside conflicts and obligations (family illness, long commute, works from home 1-2 days a week)
A look at the candidates

**Candidate 2**

- 22 year member of department
  - Excellent teacher (has won many awards)
  - Great interpersonal skills..but may come across as very political
  - Respected by faculty and administration but can often appear self-centered
  - Extremely active in service and committee work
  - Entrepreneurial almost to a fault
  - Tenured
  - Scholarship is good but not outstanding
  - Seems to live on campus..can be there days, nights, early mornings, weekends..does this person have a life off campus?
At Your Tables

- Come up with three questions that you would ask each candidate.
- I will randomly answer those questions as best I can representing each candidate.
- After that you will “vote” on which of the two you would prefer to hire as chair based on the qualifications and interview.