

Communicating with Impact

In Job Interviews and Once Hired



Ken Foster
Cindy Petitt
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Ken: Hello and welcome. This is Ken Foster. I'm the author of *Ask and You Will Succeed* and today I'm your host. Today we're going to talk about how to communicate with impact. I'll be interviewing Cindy Petitt, who is an Executive Coach, former head of human resources, and she has 20 plus years in the human resource field.

Cindy, welcome.

Cindy: Hi. Thank you Ken.

Ken: In today's economy, one of the most important times to communicate with impact is during the job interview. What can you tell us about how to ace that interview?

Cindy: Probably the most important thing to do to ace an interview is to be prepared. Be over prepared if possible. Being prepared means that you go online, you find out everything you can about the company, you find out everything you can about key players in the company.

There are many different websites like Vault.com where you can go to query employees within the company confidentially. You can find out about typical interview questions and interview format the company typically uses. It helps to know if the interviewer is going to ask you to talk about your strengths and weaknesses, or if the interview will be a competency based interview format.

When answering questions, be thoughtful in your responses. Tell the interviewer:

What you did : *I led a major project*

How you did it and what made it challenging: *This was a difficult project to manage because the 30 team members were located in 10 different countries and our timeframes were tight so I had to make sure the roles were clear*

What were the results of your leadership: *I let people run with their roles. Consequently, we finished ahead of schedule, and the team came up with recommendations that will save the organization \$1 million dollars.*

It is also helpful to know if you will be given a case study to describe what you would do if you were faced with the same issues. In some interviews, but this is not typical, you will be given a challenge question or a brainteaser to solve so that the interviewer can see how you think under pressure.

Physical presence is also important. When you go into the interview, you want to project confidence. Projecting confidence means having a slow smile, direct eye contact, and a good posture. No fidgeting.

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What is a slow smile? Let me give you an example. Often when you see someone, he or she has a big smile. Your response may be that the person is a very happy person or is happy to see you, or that it's a superficial smile – a politician's smile. But what if the person looks at you first, establishes eye contact, and then smiles. When this happens you know the person is smiling at you.

I was reading a story not long ago about a woman, Chris, who had inherited her father's business. But before this, when Chris was in college, she was known for being a perky, Pollyanna-type of person. Her friends were surprised when she inherited the business and decided to run it as the new CEO. They couldn't imagine how Chris was going to establish the stature and credibility needed to function in that new role.

Chris and a one of her friends were having lunch together. The friend saw Chris interact with some business associates. The friend said: "Wow. You have really changed a lot." Chris responded: "No. I have only changed one thing. I have delayed my smile just by a few seconds." Chris then told her friend about how her father had pulled out an article and given it to her about the importance of a smile. The article also stressed the importance of making sure a smile is sincere by looking a person in the eye first, shaking his or her hand, and *then* smiling. It's interesting how something as subtle as that can make such a huge difference.

When you look a person in the eyes, don't look at them like you are looking through them. There was research done in Boston many years ago where the researchers had two sets of groups. Both groups were asked to partner with another participant in the study and have a normal conversation. But for one group, the members were asked to count the number of blinks by their partner.

The researchers then interviewed the partners after the conversation was over. The partners of group members counting the blinks were far more likely to say they had established good rapport. They felt warmth from that person. They felt the person was interested in them. Even though the whole reason why their partners were looking so closely at them was to count the their blinks, it showed that the partner was present. So they connected.

It's also important to dress appropriately. What does that mean? It means what you wear demonstrates respect for the people who are interviewing you. If you feel that dressing up is showing that you are placing great importance on this interview, then you should conservative business attire for the interview. However, if the typical attire in that particular company is very casual, like blue jean and shorts-casual, then

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a suit and tie may not be appropriate for that interview. This is particularly true if how people dress in the company is intentional in order to establish rapport with their clients. The point is – be respectful and show the interviewers that you have some understanding of the company’s culture. If in doubt, it is better to err on the side of overdressing.

Finally, when you’re in the interview, it’s important to make sure you answer the question asked. Stay focused on the question that was presented to you. Don’t dance around it, or get off on a tangent. If there are several different ways that you could interpret the question, then ask for clarification.

After the interview, send a thank you note. I’ve seen reports that indicate as many as 95% of people who go on interviews do not send thank you notes, so this is an easy way for you to stand out.

Ken: That leads us right into the next question. It’s about what we should avoid doing in interviews. Let’s talk a little bit about that.

Cindy: One of the first things to avoid in an interview is asking questions that make it clear you’re not prepared. Now it’s important to ask thoughtful questions that demonstrate your interest. However, if you ask the question, for example: “What is your company’s number one priority right now?” and the answer to that question is prominently on their website, you are basically communicating to them that you didn’t do your homework.

It reminds me of a situation where a former organization was heavily recruiting for an executive. We hired a recruiter to contact this specific person and to bring her to the table. When she came into the interview, this was basically her job to lose. Everyone already was impressed with her credentials and she immediately started asking questions. It was very clear that she hadn’t even bothered to do a quick internet search on the company.

She was asking questions about who was in what position, which was clearly stated in the organizational chart that was on the company website. She was asking questions about products and services, which also was on the company website. She lost the job. Although we were very interested in her, it was clear to my company that she was not all that interested in us.

I also think it is unwise in your first interview to bring up compensation and benefits. You don’t want your first interview to be about what you need to be happy in that particular job. Make the first interview a learning experience where both of you are

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testing out whether there's a good fit in terms of the work and the culture. There will be plenty of time down the road to talk about compensation and benefits if the interview process progresses and moves closer to a job offer.

Another thing that you should avoid is complaining about your current position or your current boss. Often in interviews someone will ask you, "Why are you leaving your current job?" It may be tempting for you to say, "It's a horrible place to work or my boss is abusive," but when you do that you leave the interviewers wondering what you might say about them to other people if you were hired.

Finally, do not assume that they know all about you. Too often people who are internal candidates, published authors, or prominent in their fields assume that the interviewer knows a lot about them already. As a consequence they leave out relevant and important pieces of information about their experience and/or accomplishments. So, it is best not to go into an interview assuming that people know anything about you. Go in and tell your story, emphasize the things you think are important for them to know.

Ken: This is a little off point, but I've been in interviews with people where they walk in the door and their energy looks like they're completely drained. Is there something you can tell yourself to be more present and have better energy?

Cindy: Genuine interest in the job will usually be reflected in your energy. So go into the interview mentally prepared, and let your interest show. Go into the interview with a genuine sense of curiosity and, no matter what happens, look at the experience as having the opportunity to meet some interesting people along the way. You also are going to have an opportunity to talk about yourself, which everyone likes to do, and you're going to learn a little bit about the people who you are talking to.

Often that's enough for people to feel energetic. But some people's whole metabolism and whole presence is at a lower vibration level than other people. If this is you, it may help to think about the most exciting thing that you've ever done. Try to replicate those feelings when going into the interview.

Here is a simple example. When you see your child after returning from a trip, think of the excitement that you have on your face and the energy that you feel. Think about the kind of energy you bring to the table when you're with somebody that you really care a lot about. You want the people interviewing you to feel that same level of interest and energy.

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Ken: That's really good. Doesn't it also help to visualize that this is the job for you, getting in tune with that, seeing yourself in that job?

Cindy: Yes, it does.

Ken: Okay. Once hired, how do you establish yourself quickly?

Cindy: I'll focus on three things that can make a big difference. The first is to approach the new job as a confident learner and observer. Make yourself approachable and demonstrate humility rather than presenting yourself as someone who has all the answers. Ask questions to show that you want to learn. When in meetings, watch and listen to people so that you can pick up the culture of the organization.

A second thing that's important to do is to immediately start building a network. Often it is very helpful, soon after you are hired, to meet with the people who interviewed you to thank them for their support. You can find out from them who other stakeholders are in the organization that are important to your success. Reach out to your peer group and to your new staff.

The final thing is to demonstrate respect for whatever situation you're walking into. Often people are hired because there's a need for a turnaround or some type of change within the organization. There is no need for you to criticize the current situation because it only alienates people. Just assess it, accept it for what it is, and move forward.

Ken: What you said about building a network really touched a spark in me, Cindy. I remember when I was working as a contractor with Bank of America. When I came into the organization I was thinking to myself, "I really need to find the people who will support my sales team in the organization." I networked through that organization and found the right key people who then supported us to bridge a lot of cultural gaps and create an incredible experience for everybody.

That is so important.

Cindy: It's critical and it's something that men tend to do much more naturally than women. Having a good network can make the difference between being successful in a transitional situation or derailing. It's absolutely critical.

Ken: Let's talk about some of the mistakes people make when they first enter an organization.

Cindy: One of the biggest mistakes I see that people make, particularly when they're moving into a more senior position, is to focus on things that are superficial.

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For example, I can think of a situation of a recently hired executive. The first things that the person wanted were a bigger office, a special parking place, and a more impressive title. All of these things were to create the perception that the executive was in a position of importance.

What happens in cases like this is that people begin to lose respect for the individual. Most people recognize importance doesn't come from a larger office or bigger title. It really comes from how you operate, how you interact with people.

Another mistake that people make is just the opposite of that. It's being invisible. It's not reaching out. It's not trying to develop a network within the organization. It's sitting in your office waiting for people to come to you.

A third mistake is smartest person in the room syndrome. Of course, we've all experienced situations where someone has to have the last word on everything. In meetings, the person is doing all the talking and not seeking to understand the different points of view of other individuals; or the person debates unnecessarily about issues that aren't important.

A fourth mistake is being judgmental. Often a person, a senior manager or executive, is brought into an organization to make changes. Unfortunately, too often in these situations, new executives use the burning platform approach. They tend to criticize everything that exists now. They try to present a case that what was done before they joined the organization has been a mistake, and has been damaging to the organization. This approach is disrespectful for the people who've invested a lot in putting those processes, those systems or whatever in place.

You are basically telling them that everything they've done over the last two or three years has been a waste of time.

It's much, much better to acknowledge the positive aspects of what has been done already and show how the changes build on that. When people see that there is continuity in their efforts and in leadership, they are more likely to commit to future actions. In other words, even though you're making dramatic change, you are building on the learning from what came before you.

Ken: Well, that's really all about communicating effectively with people in the organization. Let's talk about what gets in the way of communicating effectively.

Cindy: There are four things that most often get in the way of communicating effectively. These are different communication styles, different mindsets, operating off your assumptions, and different communication tactics.

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Communication Styles

Back to the first one: communication styles. There are two fundamental communication styles. One focuses on clarity. I am communicating with you because I want you to understand what I'm saying. I want to clearly convey information to you. The second style focuses on relationships. I want to establish, preserve and/or strengthen my relationship with you.

There is a world of difference between those two communication styles. A good example is, if I am a direct communicator and a friend of mine, who is a relationship-focused communicator, calls me to ask if I want to go shopping with her. My response might be, "Not really," and that's what I'll say because it's clear – there is no ambiguity. My intent is positive – I don't want to create confusion or waste her time with a long answer, but going shopping isn't a good thing for me to do right now.

While my intent is positive, my friend is probably going to be offended because my response feels much too abrupt. What happens if the situation is reversed, and I am the one asking my friend to go shopping? Although my friend may not want to go shopping, instead of saying "no" to me, she may say, "Well, I've got so much work to do. And, I don't really have any money right now." She may come up with all these excuses hoping that I will get the hint that she doesn't want to go. Well, if I'm a direct communicator, I may not pick up on those hints. So, because my friend didn't say "no," I may say, "Great. Well, then let's go ahead and go. It would be good for you to get out."

Again, my friend is going to be offended because there are rituals that people who communicate to build relationships have, and they depend on other people picking up on those rituals.

The difference between the two communication styles often creates hurt feelings, anger, and even adversarial relationships.

Mindsets

The second communication barrier is different mindsets. This covers a very broad spectrum. Some people are optimists, and others are pessimists. There are some people who are talkers, and others are listeners. There are some people who tend to be task-focused, and others who tend to be people-focused. If your mindsets are not aligned and you are not tuned in to the mindset of another person, then chances are you're going to assume that they think you think so you push your mindset rather than trying to understand theirs.

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I don't know if you've ever seen a situation where a person who is the pessimist and a person who is an optimist are carrying on a conversation. Often what happens in the conversation is the pessimist is complaining and the optimist is trying to convince the person that the situation is not quite as bad as what he or she may think.

How is this making the pessimist feel? The pessimist is going to feel that the other person isn't listening to him or her. People who are pessimists often just want to vent, to get their feelings out; and, optimistic people are trying to make the pessimists feel better by solving their problems, or worse yet, by convincing them that there isn't a problem.

Assumptions

The third barrier is assumptions. We all make assumptions every day. In fact, we actually couldn't make it through life if we didn't make assumptions because assumptions are 'thinking shortcuts'; they conserve brain energy. Unfortunately, too often assumptions are grounded in limiting beliefs and we act on those assumptions as though they're the truth. When we make assumptions about someone else's motives for acting a certain way, more often than not those assumptions tend to be negative and are incorrect.

Here is an example: John may be coming out of a very negative meeting, having a really bad day, or arriving at work after sitting in traffic. John comes into a conversation preoccupied and in a bad place emotionally. The tendency is for other people in the conversation to assume that how John is expressing himself emotionally is because of them or the conversation when, in fact, it has nothing to do with either. Typically, before ever checking out that assumption, what happens is people immediately respond to the anger they think is directed at them. Pretty soon the conversation gets out of control all because of people operating off of erroneous assumptions.

Communication Tactics

The fourth communication barrier is different tactics people use when they communicate, particularly when they are under stress. Some people tend to fight; they dig in their heels. Other people tend to withdraw. It's important to understand the tendencies of others so when having conversations with them you can sense when they're experiencing stress and, for example, adjust your tactics accordingly.

Ken: That's a lot of great information. Let's talk a little bit now about when a person is in a meeting. Are there any general rules about speaking up when you're in a general meeting?

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Cindy: Well, I'll focus on three tips I think make a difference. The first tip is to think of the word "WAIT". Before you ever say a word in a meeting, think to yourself "Why Am I Talking?" What is it that you want to say? What point is it that you are trying to make and why?

The second tip is to pay attention to the culture of the organization you are in, particularly in terms of expectations about talking in meetings. In some organizations the culture is that if you don't talk at a meeting, then there's no reason for you to be there. In other cultures, only people of a certain place in the hierarchy are expected to talk in meetings.

The third tip, which particularly relates to women, is to use what I call laser speak. It is being as concise as you possibly can. It's being concise about your objective, the point you want to make, and the basis for that point. It is basically three sentences.

Here is a very simple example:

1. Objective: *"I'd like clarification on the comment you made about the weather."*
2. Main Point: *"You said there was a 50% chance of rain, where did you get that information?"*
3. Rationale: *"I am trying to decide whether or not I need to bring an umbrella with me today."*

In three sentences you can get your point across very clearly. Often what happens with women, because they tend to be relationship-focused communicators, is that they tend to have a very long preamble, short content or main point, and a very long closing. By the time they get to their main point, they've lost the attention of the group, or at least the men in the group.

Ken: Makes a lot of sense. Let's talk a little bit about how to deal with people who are abrasive, you just don't get along with, or you would prefer to avoid, but you still have to work with them.

Cindy: When this happens, first check out your assumptions. Let's use the abrasive person as an example. Are you assuming the person is abrasive because of his or her reaction to you? If so, then you are making their behavior about you and that is what makes it so offensive. But, how another person acts is not about you; it is about them.

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If you knew the abrasive person was going through something very difficult in his or her personal life that is having an emotional impact, would you view the abrasive behavior differently? Chances are you would. Or, they could have just come from a really brutal meeting with their boss. They could have very poor emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. None of those things have anything to do with you.

So, if you can recognize that how they're acting is a statement about them, then it frees you up to carry on a conversation in a way that's not taking personally anything that you're receiving from that individual. It doesn't make the behavior acceptable, but it does make it easier to tolerate.

Ken: Yes, I can remember a few situations like that. On a related issue, I know that conflict can be a good thing, but how do you keep it from getting out of control?

Cindy: Think of conflict as a continuum for the parties involved, you're either at one point or another along that continuum. At one end of the continuum it is: "I want you to understand where I'm coming from." This is where people are trying to persuade you to accept their point of view. At the other end of the continuum is: "I want to understand where you are coming from."

If you're in a situation that involves conflict, checkout where are you on that continuum. If you're stuck on the "I want you to understand where I'm coming from," you probably are contributing to the conflict. Basically, resistance breeds resistance. You are resisting their ideas, so it deepens their resistance to yours.

When both parties are locked in their own positions, trying to persuade each other, little to no listening is occurring. The easiest way to begin to diffuse conflict is to express an interest in the other person's point of view. Demonstrate that you want to understand where they're coming from. Then, try to find what your common interests are so that you can begin to build on them.

If you just can't seem to find those common interests, it probably means your conversation is at the wrong level. You may be debating what actions to take to solve a problem, but your values and/or objectives are different. You need to elevate the conversation to that level. Start discussing what needs to happen to bring the different objectives closer together.

We see this dilemma played out in politics and policy debates. Look at the debates about health care reform, so much of that is due to huge differences in values and objectives among the various stakeholders. Agreements first have to be reached on

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a common set of values and objectives before progress can be made on what health care reform covers.

Identifying mutually agreeable actions will be much easier once you reach agreements on the objectives, values or principles you all are willing to support.

Ken: What about having those difficult conversations? Any thoughts about those?

Cindy: When it comes to giving feedback or delivering a message that you know people won't like, your first reaction often is that this is going to be a difficult conversation. You immediately categorize the tone of the conversation as negative, rather than focusing on the ultimate outcome you are trying to achieve. If you are giving feedback about some behavior changes that will make a person more effective, then you are making an investment in that person. If you reframe the conversation from negative to an investment, your whole mindset about how to approach the conversation will shift.

Think about that for a second. Let's say that Maria is not delivering because she hasn't involved the right people in her projects. If I'm thinking, *"Giving Mary this feedback is going to be a painful conversation – she may become defensive or cry,"* I will probably try to avoid a feedback conversation, and when I do ultimately give Mary feedback, I am probably not going to be communicating clearly. I'm going to try to get in and out of the conversation as quickly as possible. Already I've increased the likelihood of the other person being defensive. But, if I go into that conversation thinking, *"I'm going to make an investment in Mary and this will be a valuable mentoring opportunity,"* the conversation won't feel as difficult and how I frame my feedback will probably be much more constructive.

Another important point to focus on when having a conversation like this is to think of yourself as a learner. Rather than telling Mary what you don't like or what you are disappointed about, ask questions to better understand the situation and Mary's perspective. Ask Mary what she has learned from that situation. Now, you are facilitating learning for both of you as opposed having a one-way conversation that feels judgmental to the person on the receiving end.

Also, it's important to be clear about what outcome you want. Let's say you are about to have a conversation with a business partner who you have been friends with for over 20 years. You want to talk about what is not working in your business relationship. Think first about the outcome you are seeking. For example, if you want to sever your business relationship, is preserving your friendship with your partner an equally important outcome?

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How you approach the conversation will be very different if you are only focused on severing the business relationship versus also preserving your friendship.

Ken: Makes a lot of sense. You've covered so much information here and I'd like to ask you what are the three things that you want people to take away from this conversation today?

Cindy: Number one is to project confidence and warmth in all of your communications with others, be present when you're with them, and let them know that you are genuinely interested in them.

The second is to always assume positive intent no matter what your situation. If someone is rude to you, don't assume that they are intentionally trying to hurt you. Rather, consider the possibility that they may be having a bad day.

Third, approach all conversations as a learner and with a sense of curiosity.

Ken: That's great. This has been really helpful information, Cindy, and I'd like to know where people can go if they want to get more information about you, your products, your services and how to connect with you.

Cindy: They can go to my website, which is www.CoachForPositiveAction.com.

Ken: Cindy, any final thoughts?

Cindy: I encourage listeners to look forward to every communication that they have with another person as an opportunity to build equity in that relationship.

Ken: Awesome. It's been a great conversation. Thanks so much.

Cindy: Thank you, Ken.