

Perspective Pays

By Dianna Booher

Have you known people who had the answers before you asked the questions? That is, they see only one side to a conflict, one answer to the test, one best way to survey for training needs, only one way to conduct the training. To capsule the problem in a phrase, they lack perspective.

Political spin doctors earn their keep by planting their perspective on social issues with the public. But perspective as a way of life comes from a communication style that values input before output. Listening before speaking.

Recently, we called a technician take a look at an air-conditioner at home. When I came in from work that evening, I saw his mess. Rusty-looking splatters of water covered the kitchen cabinets, appliances, and floor. Obviously he hadn't cleaned up after himself. I was perturbed as I scrubbed up the rusty mess. But when he returned the next day to finish the repair job on the air-conditioner, he explained. "Sorry I left such a mess yesterday. Just as I was 'bout to leave I noticed that you had a leak from some busted plumbing. The spillovers in the attic were just about to overflow and come down through your kitchen ceiling. So, I rummaged around and found a bucket and tried to empty as much water off as I could. Saved your ceiling at least." My anger melted with the new perspective.

That's not to say that perspective will lead you to agreeing with someone else's attitude, behavior or action to resolve a problem. But perspective can give you just the information you need to deal from a position of strength, to offer excellent customer service when you don't like the customer, to fire an employee who has annoying habits, or to hire a prospective employee with a rather "colorful" past, but an intriguing plan for the future.

Input before output—in problem solving or decision making, as well as in communicating. At all costs, avoid coming across as a one-directional communicator, as this vice president of operations did in his office just recently.

"The people we hire here as cinema managers are just young kids. Twenty-two to twenty-four years old. They think they've got the world by the tail--they're making all the money they need, and they have little initiative in improving themselves as far as supervisory skills go. They don't know how to hire, they don't know how to give a meaningful performance appraisal, they don't understand customer service, they don't even have the fundamentals of financial management. We've given them operational manuals, but they don't read them. So, we're going another route. We've got in mind the university concept. We plan to put them through a three-week course that will totally equip them to operate their cinemas profitably--everything from budgeting to operating the popcorn machine."

A key cinema manager with the company for six months had a different perspective: "Management gave us a manual and said 'read the book.' That's all the training we've had. I want to do well. I've had experience as a supervisor. And I've got lots of ideas

about improving customer service around here. But there's absolutely no communication from headquarters about the recent liability lawsuits about injuries and about sexual harassment in the performance appraisal process. We've got supervisors afraid to make any decisions for themselves because management won't clarify their position on these legal issues."

Maybe these two people should share their perspectives. With input and understanding comes the power to negotiate, motivate, and innovate. The next time you have a conflict with a training partner, a supplier, an employee or team leader, consider asking for their perspective on the situation or issue before launching into your own viewpoint. It could even save you an embarrassing moment like I almost spent with the repairman.

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For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.