N A O M I
K A R T E N
Speaker, Consultant, Author

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Specializing in helping organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Improve communications
- Strengthen teamwork
- Manage change

Author of:

- *Managing Expectations*
- *Establishing Service Level Agreements*
- *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*

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How Do You Know?

During a skiing lesson last winter, I heard my instructor, Laurie, say to a fellow in the class, "How can I get you to . . .? Before she said another word, I became annoyed. What a terrible training technique, asking students what she has to do to get them to stop their sloppy skiing. How can she expect students to feel motivated to improve if she's going to chastise them? Laurie was a great instructor, but as her rebuke revealed, she fell short in the way she offered feedback.

Or did she? In the fraction of a second after Laurie's "How can I get you to," I had an entire conversation with myself. I knew what she was going to say, and I knew what I thought about what she was going to say.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Have you ever done that? Similarly, have you ever known positively what the expression on someone's face signified? Or known with certainty the explanation for someone's actions or behavior?

Have you ever jumped to a conclusion and then discovered you were wrong?

I may be wrong, but I'm quick!

Jumping to conclusions is a natural thing, usually without negative consequences. But what about the times when you immediately judged a person's behavior or intentions and reacted in a way that created a muddled mess? If you were lucky, you quickly learned of your mistake, so you could gulp, or apologize, or rectify the situation. More serious, though, are the times when your hasty conclusions created a problem you didn't learn about till much later — or maybe even never learned about at all.

Suggestion: When someone's words, actions or behavior lead you to quickly pounce on a conclusion, ask yourself: How do I know that this is so?

If your answer casts even just the slightest doubt on your conclusion, put that conclusion aside till you can learn more. If circumstances permit, ask questions to clarify your interpretation of the other party's intentions or actions. And notice those times when you were positive your conclusion was correct and later learned you were wrong. Awareness and acknowledgement of your behavior will help you transform your jumping into an occasional hop.

I'm much better than I used to be about jumping to conclusions. But alas, not always, particularly in the realm of listening, as I realized when I heard the rest of Laurie's question to my schuss-mate: "How can I get you to do it like that every time?"

Ohmygoodness. She wasn't chastising him, she was complimenting him. Her question was a gracious way of praising him for skillfully carrying out a maneuver that had eluded him all morning and of encouraging him to strive to do it again and again.

Repeat after me: How do I know, how do I know, how do I know?

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

I'm Waiting as Fast as I Can

We spend 34% of our time waiting. Waiting in traffic. Waiting in lines. Waiting on hold. Waiting for tech support. Waiting for the repairman. Waiting for information.

Actually, I made up that statistic. I have no idea what the actual percentage is, but I'm positive that's how much time I spent waiting last week. Most people are willing to tolerate a certain amount of waiting. But people get annoyed with waiting that feels excessive, especially when they have no idea how long they'll have to wait. As a result, how you manage your customers' waiting experiences can affect how pleased or distressed they are with whatever it is they're waiting for.

For example, when my husband and I ordered dinner in a charming restaurant we hadn't been to before, we didn't expect immediate delivery of our meals. Good food takes time. Even still. . . . Just as I was teetering on the edge of wondering how much longer we'd have to wait, along came our waitress, quite possibly straight from Intro to Waiting 101, to tell us, "I've just checked on your order and it's almost ready."

What a simple, effective wait-managing tactic. When customers are made to wait, and then wait some more, they begin to fidget, fuss, fume and find fault with those serving them. In letting us know the status of our order, our waitress disrupted this mental fidgetry.

Waiting is a perceptual experience; when we're eager for a given outcome, we perceive that we've been waiting longer than we actually have. Receiving an update can reset our internal stopwatch, so that we perceive the total wait time as less than it actually is. Giving customers the status is a key satisfaction-boosting measure.

Buffalo standard time

We had the opposite experience at lunch during a vacation trip. We were in buffalo country, and my husband was eager to try a buffalo burger. We gave our orders. And then we waited. And waited. And waited.

Customers have certain expectations about how long they'll have to wait in various situations. This was an unpretentious restaurant, a buffalo burger sort of place. It was 1:30. The lunch crowd had thinned out. And all we'd ordered were sandwiches. How long could it possibly take?

Recalling the afore-mentioned waitress, I imagined our waiter sidling up and explaining, "We're trying to lasso a buffalo for you. It'll just be another few minutes." But no

sign of our waiter or of a lasso-ing in progress. And no sign of our lunch, not for a Really Long Time.

In both of these gustatory situations, a little extra waiting was a minor matter. Not so a few weeks ago when I discovered my website was down, and along with it, my email. A call to tech support determined that the ISP was switching to a new thingamajigger and the server was down.

When will it be up again? "I have no idea," claimed the tech support guy, elegantly modeling how not to show empathy.

Wait a minute — or a day

Consider the circumstances. The ISP had given customers no advance notice that a major switcheroo had been scheduled and that we might experience some downtime. As a result, we were unable to make arrangements that might have enabled us to tolerate the downtime in less of an urge-to-scream frame of mind. To make matter worse, they were installing this change during peak business hours.

In the restaurants we had visited, extended waiting might have caused a bit of aggravation and a hunger pang or two, but nothing critical hinged on speedier delivery. But my ISP? I'd been willing to ignore some previous service lapses as just one of those things. But it didn't take me the full 30 hours that service was down to conclude that an unannounced midweek upgrade that required an unknown period of downtime is a sign of a company that doesn't care about its customers.

As to an apology from the ISP after the fact, well, there was none. A sincere apology helps a compny show that it knows it has inconvenienced its customers. The absence of an apology, on the other hand, is a sign of cluelessness.

Manage the wait state

If you know your customers will have to wait for some specified outcome, be proactive and let them know in advance. They may not like to hear it, but at least they'll be able to prepare for it. And whenever you can, minimize the perceived wait time by giving customers regular updates or at least a quick "your meal's almost ready" type of message. Or give them something to occupy their attention while they're waiting. Overall, think about who might be waiting for something you're delivering and take steps to prevent their perception of a wait that's interminable.

As for me, after my ISP pulled its switcheroo, I did one of my own and now have a new ISP. Oh, and in case you're wondering, buffalo tastes like beef. Tasty, but not worth the wait.

COMMUNICATION

Contradiction Countdown

Many years ago, on a beautiful hillside in Vermont, I went bungee jumping. It's something I had always wanted to do.

So there we were, my bungee-master and I, standing on a platform that was being raised by a crane to an elevation of 120 feet. My bungee-master explained that when we reached the high point, he'd check everything to make sure I was safe. Then he'd count down from five. He explained that when he reached three, I should take a very deep breath. When he said two, I should clear my mind completely. And on the count of one, I should dive. Not jump. Dive. "Go head first," he instructed me.

We reached the high point. I looked down. My husband, Mr. Not-Me-Not-Now-Not-Ever, was the size of an ant. Every ounce of me was trembling.

My bungee-master yanked on a rope and declared that I was safe. Then he asked me if I was nervous. As I recall, I said something like @#$%<&*), which my spell-checker doesn't understand, but I'm sure you do.

He asked if I was ready. I told him to shut up and start counting. He said "five." My heart was pounding.

He said "four." My hands were tingling.

He said "three," and I took a very deep breath.

He said "two" . . . and I knew I was supposed to clear my mind completely, but I couldn't because what popped into my mind was a contradiction that seemed a lot less menacing 120 feet earlier.

You see, the bungee jumping brochure said, "Is it safe? Absolutely! Our staff has supervised over 10,000 jumps without a single accident or injury of any kind." Which sounded pretty good to me. So I signed up and paid. It was then that they gave me a release form, which said, "I understand that bungee jumping is a potentially hazardous sport, which may result in whiplash, rope-burn, major injuries, or death . . . . Sign here."
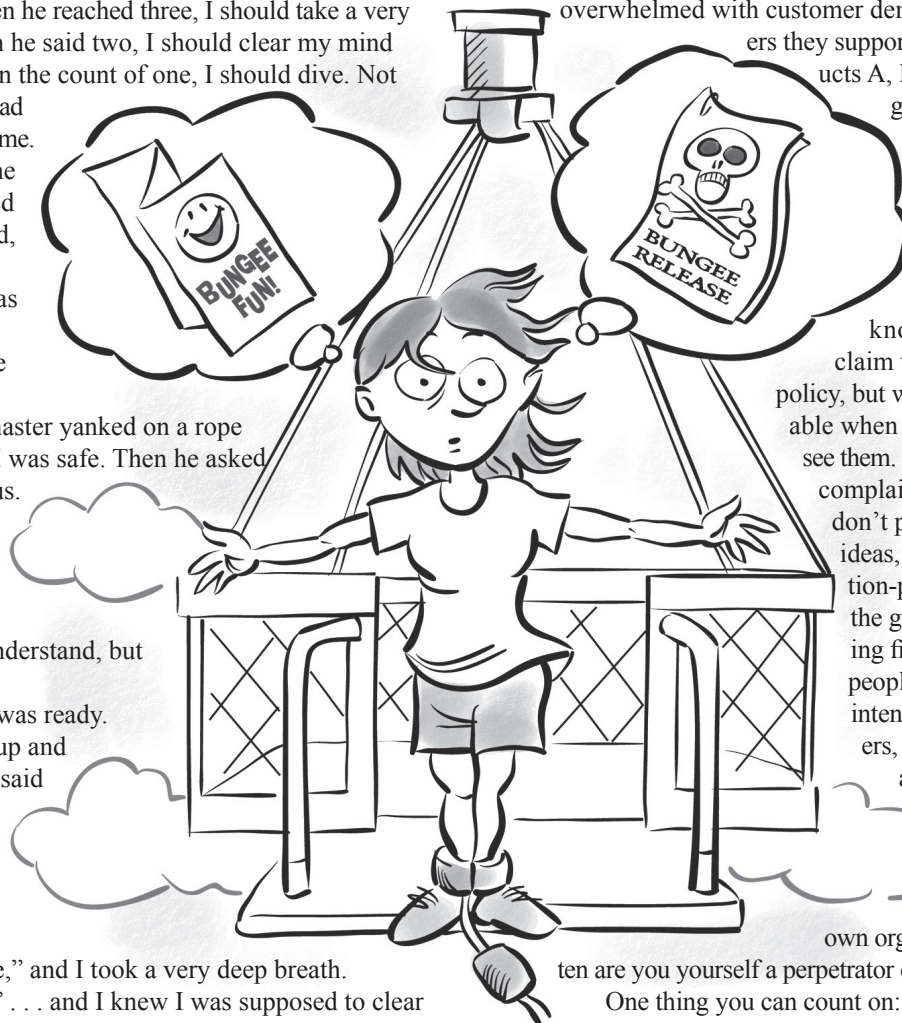
What????

Of course, I regularly encounter contradictions like this in organizations I visit to deliver seminars and consulting services. For example, I've met technical support groups overwhelmed with customer demand who tell customers they support only Approved Products A, B, and C, and yet they go ahead and provide support for Unapproved Products X, Y and Z when customers come a-calling.

Similarly, I've known managers who claim to have an open-door policy, but who are always unavailable when employees come to see them. I've met people who complain that their teammates don't pay attention to their ideas, while their own attention-paying behavior earns the gold in the Idea Squelching finals. I've worked with people who see malicious intent in the behavior of others, but can readily explain away the same behavior in themselves.

How many contradictions can you find in your own organization? And how often are you yourself a perpetrator or willing accomplice?

One thing you can count on: When people encounter contradictions, they tend to latch onto the side of the contradiction that favors their pre-existing preferences. Which is why I decided bungee jumping was safe.

And so my bungee master said "one" and yes, I dove. Head first. And screamed. And laughed. And screamed. And laughed. It was exhilarating. It was insane. I never said I was without contradictions myself.

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MANAGING CHANGE

How to Fumble a Change Effort

During my presentations on managing change, people often ask me why senior managers are so poor at communicating during periods of major change. Why does top management withhold information? Why do they tell us so little, when telling us almost anything would help? Why don't they learn from the struggles of the past so that we can get through the next change with less pain?

Actually, it's not just senior managers who are often guilty of failing to communicate. Managers at all levels of the org chart from project manager to senior executive often fall short. Here is an example, just one of many situations I've encountered, of a difficult change made all the worse by the failure to communicate.

An IT department planned a large-scale, company-wide desktop upgrade. But no one in a position of authority said a word about it to the employees who were to be affected by it. Glenn, the project manager of the implementation team, repeatedly asked his CIO to make a company-wide announcement of the upgrade, but the CIO ignored these requests.

As a result, employees lacked an understanding of:

- why the upgrade was taking place
- how they'd benefit
- when the process would be rolled out
- how long it would take
- who would carry out the upgrade
- what they'd experience as it proceeded
- what they could do to minimize disruption to their work

Trying to compensate for his CIO's failure, Glenn notified department managers himself, but he lacked the CIO's status and clout, and many managers ignored or dismissed his notification. In the meantime, the rumor mill went into action, rapidly circulating inaccurate information and distorting key details. The first inkling most managers had of what was actually going to transpire occurred when Glenn contacted them to schedule the upgrades for their department.

So how did employees react to the upgrade? According to Glenn, they were mighty angry, accusing him and his team of tampering with their computers and interfering with their work. They became even angrier when they experienced degraded system performance as the technical team resolved bugs and fine-tuned the network.

Forcing and foisting

When I was invited in as a consultant and asked to meet with several of these employees, I discovered that the situation was even worse than Glenn had portrayed it. Many employees didn't realize the upgrade was a company-wide effort, convinced instead that their department had been singled out for technology abuse. They saw the upgrade as being done to them, rather than for them; as being forced down their throats; as being foisted on them with no consideration for their priorities and obligations.

The reputation of the IT implementation team, only fair to middling to begin with, was badly damaged as a result of this botched effort. But more than just that team was affected. Not distinguishing one part of IT from another, many business unit employees now viewed all IT personnel as a thoughtless, incompetent, blundering bunch of bozos.

Who suffered in this situation? Everyone: Glenn, his team members, all the rest of IT, and all the employees made to endure the transition to newly-upgraded computers.

Be forewarned

Even in the best of cases, a change on this scale is complex and often entails a good bit of grumbling and grousing by those on the receiving end. But ignoring the probable impact on those affected by a change ensures that the experience will be far nastier for them — and therefore also for those implementing the change — than it might otherwise be.

This article is adapted from my eBook, **Changing How You Communicate During Change,** which describes how to reduce the turbulence associated with change. For details, see: www.nkarten.com/changeguide.html.