

REFLECTION, INQUIRY AND ADVOCACY

The ability to master and apply the threefold communication skills of reflection, inquiry and advocacy is indispensable for effective management and teamwork. While much has been written about these skills as aspects of dialogue, the basic concepts are quite simple. Simply stated, reflection is about self-awareness of one's own thoughts and feelings, inquiry is concerned with curiosity and understanding other people's views, and advocacy is the ability to share one's own views clearly and honestly.

Most people, and managers in particular, are more familiar with the idea of advocacy, at least in principle. But advocacy without the subtle insight of reflection and the generous intent of inquiry is ineffective, and more likely to generate arguments over fixed positions than to collaborative understanding or innovation. Therefore, most managers and teams find it beneficial to place particular emphasis on developing the habits of reflection and inquiry, leading to a sound balance of the three skills.

Reflection

Reflection is the window that opens the possibility for genuine communication. It begins with self-awareness, and usually means interrupting or slowing down one's automatic thought process enough to recognize one's own assumptions and biases. In a sense, reflection has the same intent as inquiry--curiosity and a desire to understand--but in reflection it is applied to oneself first. It actually requires a kind of respect for one's own thoughts and feelings as something to be investigated, rather than assumptions to be taken for granted or fixed positions to be imposed or defended.

Reflection is essentially an individual skill, but can also be applied in group conversations. It is most powerful when applied in stressful or highly engaged situations. There are two aspects: First is awareness, which means simply bringing one's attention into the present moment. The second is introspection, which requires looking in depth at one's own thought process.

Inquiry

Inquiry is the heart of effective communication. It can be understood as an orientation toward conversations with others based on the genuine desire to share and understand each other's views and assumptions. The primary skill is listening, which can be challenging in itself, but beyond that is the genuine intent to understand. One must actually care about others enough to empathize with their views and engage in conversation. True inquiry is motivated by openness, willingness

to question one's views, respect for different ways of thinking, and curiosity to learn and understand.

Advocacy

Advocacy is the ability to express one's ideas clearly and honestly in the context of mutual conversation. It is often misunderstood as simply being persuasive--imposing one's views on others by force of personality or overcoming opposition through airtight logic. Advocacy in this sense is marked by the confidence of knowing one's own mind through reflection, engaging with others in the spirit of inquiry, and having the courage to speak honestly, admit mistakes, and hold one's seat in the face of opposing views.

If managers are to be successful in creating organizational cultures which value continuous learning, flexibility and innovation, the keystone is teamwork and high quality communication. Formal and informal communications based on a healthy balance of reflection, inquiry and advocacy are essential. One of the paradoxes of management is that a commitment to listening and curiosity provide more powerful ground for genuine leadership and communication than does pushing logical arguments to promote and defend one's views.

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