

Leadership communication: Praise for the paraphrase

One of the most overlooked tools in clear communication is the paraphrase—summarizing what you’ve just heard so that you confirm you understood what the other person just said. This is such a simple, basic aspect of communicating effectively, but so often people ignore it, and it leads to all kinds of problems down the line.

Paraphrasing is particularly important if you’re trying to build rapport and gain credibility with someone who has more power than you—perhaps your boss, or someone on the board of directors at your organization, or a VIP you’re trying to impress. Before you plug in with your own point, quickly paraphrase what they just told you to signify that yes, you were listening and yes, you understood the list of points they just made.

If you skip this paraphrase and jump right to your reply, the speaker is left wondering, “Huh, I wonder if I made myself clear. I hope I wasn’t just talking to a wall here.” People crave that kind of connection, especially powerful people. If you’re a CEO and you’re talking to one of your underlings, believe me, you’re going to want to know to what extent your subordinate absorbed what you just said, especially if you were giving directions, suggestions or instructions on some task.

How do you paraphrase? First of all, make it short. Play back, almost like a tape recorder, the list of sequential points that the speaker just made.

For example, if the CEO or your boss is telling you how it’s important that you deliver better customer service, show up on time and develop a better relationship with your colleague down the hall, start by saying, “I totally appreciate the importance of customer service, punctuality and building relationships with my peers. Let me share some ideas in that regard.” It’s an indicator that you truly retained what you were just told and the fact that you were able to very smoothly reel off all three of those points about customer service. That alone makes the person who is speaking to you feel reassured.

Paraphrasing is also important because it avoids misunderstanding. If you do not repeat back what you just heard in a succinct manner, it can lead to all kinds of problems down the line. You can carry away from the conversation a misguided or incorrect understanding of the main message. So simple paraphrasing for five or 10 seconds can be a wonderful tool to prevent confusion or misunderstanding that can prove quite costly in the weeks or months down the line.

Another benefit of paraphrasing is that you build rapport. It makes that original speaker feel listened to and affirmed; better yet, that individual may reveal even more to you later because he or she feels confident confiding in you, knowing you really invested the time and energy to listen well.

Those few seconds of effective verbal summary have an enormous impact that work to your favor and help you build trust, respect and rapport with the people that you’re trying to win over. Use them well.