

Communication Briefings

ideas that work

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Tips of the month

■ **Start fresh** when you attack desktop clutter. Begin by clearing your filing cabinet and not your desk. If you don't have an effective system for filing papers—and ample room to place files—you will never succeed in organizing your desk.

— From the editors.

■ **Improve voice** tone by opening your mouth wide when you speak on the telephone. Do not cradle the phone on your shoulder—doing so tenses your throat, forcing you to talk from one side of your mouth.

— Adapted from “Cold Calling Tips,” Ron La Vine, www.intellworks.com.

■ **Draw queries** from your audience if no one raises a question. Prime the pump by asking “Who has the first question?” in an expectant tone. If you still have no takers, say “One question I often hear is ...”

— From the editors.

■ **Add power** to e-mail by including in your message answers to these questions: “What specific information do recipients need?” “What answers do I need from them?” “When do I need to hear from them?”

— Adapted from *The Winner's Attitude*, Jeff Gee and Val Gee, McGraw-Hill, www.books.mcgraw-hill.com.

■ **Boost creativity** by responding to unworkable ideas with these words: “That idea could work if ...” Then mention an adaptation that turns one of the idea's negative aspects around.

— Adapted from *Team Basics*, Kristin Arnold, QPC Press, www.qpcteam.com.

Receiving feedback

7 steps for reacting to criticism

Receiving negative feedback is never easy. Take these steps to ease the pressure so that you can respond in a way that creates a lasting positive impression:

1. Breathe. Before you flinch, respond, defend yourself or roll your eyes, take a deep breath. Use that brief interlude while you breathe to prepare yourself to listen without judging.

2. Detach. Mentally separate yourself from the criticism by telling yourself that the feedback is not about you personally.

3. Listen. Tune in to what the other person is saying instead of formulating your rebuttal.

4. Respond. Reassure the speaker that you are hearing the feedback by saying: “It sounds like you needed ...” or “I see what you mean.”

5. Accept. Take full responsibility

for your actions without shifting blame or making excuses. Offer a diplomatic apology: “I am sorry my actions had that effect. It certainly was not my intention.”

6. Map the future. State your intentions for better meeting the person's needs in the future: “I will definitely focus on that next time” or “I will make certain that does not happen again.”

7. Thank the other person. Remembering that the feedback was not intended as a personal attack but as a way to improve a working relationship, offer sincere thanks for the sentiment behind the conversation. Say: “Thank you for bringing that to my attention” or “I appreciate the feedback. Please let me know if you notice something like that again.”

— Adapted from “Are You Talking to Me?” Linda Larsen, www.lindalarsen.com.

Getting ahead

Make the most of office politics

Any time three or more co-workers engage in conversation, you will see office politics in action. *Use these tips to make it work for you:*

• **Overcommunicate.** If you think that withholding information will give you the edge, think again. Let others know what you are working on or planning.

• **Ask open-ended questions.** Talk to many different people from all

levels of the organization. Ask open-ended questions and then stop talking. Hearing different perspectives helps you learn what others deem important.

• **Give and take due credit.** Acknowledge those who deserve accolades. But don't miss an opportunity to accept kudos for your own work too.

— Adapted from “Ways To Make Office Politics Work For You,” Maggie Reed, Copley News Service, www.copleynews.com.

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Complain for results

You have encountered a situation so frustrating that you feel you must register a complaint with the person at the top. So how do you do it? Skip the venom and sarcasm. Instead, opt for kindness, diplomacy and class. You will be more likely to gain the leader's notice and obtain the results you want.

Strategy: If possible, begin with praise, mentioning how much you've always enjoyed working with the person's employees or department in the past. That way, when you mention the challenge you recently faced, you already have established a level of credibility.

— Adapted from "Complaints Written With Humility Get Better Results," Bob Burg, www.burg.com.

Put down the pen

Remember this when you face a tight writing deadline: Excessive tinkering and revising can weaken your writing. For one thing, your first draft might lose emotional punch as you water it down. Worse, too much tweaking of content will sap your creativity.

Remember: Only the finished product counts. Working on a document for 10 hours instead of one hour will not guarantee that the end result will be 10 times more valuable. Focus on the task and not on the clock.

— Adapted from "You Can Write Well Under Pressure," Bill Lampton, www.championshipcommunication.com.

Q&A control

Whenever you open the floor to audience questions, you risk losing control of the discussion. But you needn't give control away freely. Respond honestly if an audience member raises a question that is not relevant to today's discussion. If you respond firmly but without putting down the questioner, you maintain control without alienating your audience. **Example:** "Actually that's a little bit outside the context of today's discussion. But if you would care to meet me afterward, I would love to share my thoughts."

— From the editors.

Listening effectively

Sidestep communication confusion

When your boss, a co-worker or an employee gives you unclear information or instructions, don't settle for vague communication. Eliminate confusion—and potential problems—by asking for clarification.

Case in point: Sales manager Dick Nicholson had an underperforming salesperson. At a company gathering, the organization's CEO asked Nicholson's boss "Why is Rep X still a salesperson?" Nicholson's boss promptly told the sales manager that the CEO

wanted to promote the salesperson.

The stunned sales manager approached the CEO the next morning to ask for more information. Happily, Nicholson learned that the big boss had meant to say "Why is Rep X still on our payroll?"

Bottom line: Nicholson's simple reaction—asking for clarification—prevented a misunderstanding from escalating into a catastrophe.

— Adapted from "What Was It That the Boss Said?" Jared Sandberg, www.careerjournal.com.

Marketing know-how

Draw readers with strong headlines

Famed ad-man David Ogilvy said that four out of five people read headlines and nothing more. Beat the odds by drawing attention to your advertising copy with teaser headlines. Use these four powerful styles:

- **How to.** *How to lose weight fast. How to double your income in 30 days.* Readers are drawn to headlines that promise solutions to common problems. The better the benefit, the more likely readers will want to know more.

- **Question.** *Will your customers*

jump ship? Are you spending too much on workers' compensation? Ask a question that your customers care about, and they will feel compelled to read on.

- **Top 10.** *Ten ways to boost sales. Seven warning signs you can't afford to miss.* Even if you offer fewer than 10 ideas, numbers draw readers in by promising immediate payoff.

— Adapted from "How to Write Headlines That Get Read," Michele Pariza Wacek, www.theartistsoul.com.

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Communicating face to face

Polish your communication skills

By Marjorie Brody, CSP, CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame

Every day people speak to you. But are you really listening—or are you merely hearing?

Listening skills are especially critical in doing a job accurately and fostering good relationships—not to mention understanding others' needs. *Here are five tips to improve your listening skills:*

- **Assume an attitude** of listening readiness. Listening is active, not passive. Be mentally and physically ready. Don't answer your phone or check your PDA. It is also rude to answer a cell phone. Doing so shows lack of respect for others and will make people feel less important than the call you answered.

- **Write thoughts down.** You don't have to pretend you are writing a novel, but jotting an occasional key word or fact can improve retention. The speaker also will feel flattered that you are taking time to note his or her thoughts.

- **Paraphrase the other person.** That helps you stay alert and atten-

tive, and you will be less likely to misunderstand what was said.

- **Assume an uncomfortable position.** If you are sitting on the edge of your chair or leaning against a wall with your hand, you won't be so comfortable that your mind roams. Listening needs to be active. When you are too comfortable, you can become passive.

- **Listen as though you need to report the information to others.** Ask yourself "What's in it for me?" Then listen to make sure you understand correctly the content and the feeling behind it.

By actively practicing these effective listening pointers, you will be able to improve your communication skills in 2007 ... and beyond.

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Boosting morale

Punch up your praise techniques

Offering well-deserved praise is an effective—and inexpensive—way to build a loyal and productive work force. *Use these tips:*

- **Look harder for extraordinary accomplishments.** Ignore routine tasks that meet basic or average performance standards. Focus on menial or less pleasant tasks done to standards of excellence.

- **Distinguish individual contributions from team efforts.** Devote time with teammates to

discussing both overall project success and individual superior performance.

- **Avoid a hit-and-run approach.** Effective praise is both specific and sincere. Offer praise the time it requires by talking at length with deserving employees to learn exactly what motivates them to deliver outstanding results.

— Adapted from "Giving Praise As a Noncash Employee Motivator," Reylito Elbo, *BusinessWorld*, www.bworldonline.com.

Communicating electronically

Recover from an e-mail gaffe

You accidentally "cc-ed" the whole office on a message that contained embarrassing or unflattering comments. How do you recover?

Strategy: Admit your error to those who received the e-mail. Your troubles will compound if you lie, backpedal or pretend that your faux pas never occurred. Be sure to answer this question first: Do the comments

reflect a bigger conflict with your co-workers or boss, or were your words merely the product of a bad mood? Assess your true feelings before you prepare to clean up your e-mail mess.

— Adapted from "E-Mail Faux Pas May Present Chance to Fix a Problem," Hanah Cho, *The Baltimore Sun*, www.baltimore.sun.com.

Avoid front-line meltdowns

Customer service demands both energy and patience. Direct interaction with the public requires a constantly upbeat attitude—even though it is not easy or satisfying to help all customers.

Strategy: Give front-line employees controlled opportunities to "decompress," by allowing them to vent their aggravation occasionally. Invite supervisors and service representatives to weekly meetings wherein reps share their best and worst customer stories of the week. Reps can receive pats on the back for the best experiences, moan and groan about their worst calls, and share suggestions for how to work successfully with difficult customers in the future. Best of all, such sessions engender feelings of camaraderie between front-line workers that increase their ability to serve customers with care every day.

— Adapted from *Appreciation in Action*, Noelle Nelson, www.powerofappreciationinbusiness.com.

A smart response

When someone asks you an awkward question, offer an evasive answer such as: "That's an interesting question. Why do you ask?" or "I have never been asked that before. What do most people say?"

Reason: You gain time. And you may push your questioners to reveal exactly what they want to know—and why.

— Adapted from "Get Out of the Hot Seat!" Shawna Shuh, www.businessgraces.com.

End 'decidaphobia'

The phrase "analysis paralysis" describes a common business problem: businesspeople's tendency to mine and massage data in pursuit of perfect knowledge. The Marine Corps battles that tendency by favoring a "70% solution": If you have 70% of the information, have done 70% of the analysis and feel 70% confident, then move on.

The logic is simple. A less-than-ideal action, swiftly executed, stands a better chance of success than no action.

— Adapted from "The Go Pointer's Guide to Unforced Errors," Michael Usee, www.businessknowhow.com.

Negotiation tip

If the other party makes the first offer during a negotiation session, beware of the “anchoring effect.” Many negotiators unconsciously adjust their expectations toward that opening number.

Strategy: Counter-offer quickly when the other party opens. That reduces the chance of the first offer anchoring the negotiation.

—Adapted from *The Streetsmart Negotiator*, Harry Mills, AMACOM, www.amanet.org/books.

Face your fears

The best way to address your fears and overcome chronic concerns is to dive right into them. Volunteering to do activities that make you anxious will give you experience that eventually alleviates your fear of failure.

For example, if your desire to escape others’ notice leads you to avoid speaking up during meetings, set a goal to offer at least two comments during every session you attend. Even if your comments are not always well-received, you will learn from the experience and hone your techniques.

—Adapted from “How to Make a Friend Out of Anxiety,” Wallace Immen, *The Globe and Mail*, www.theglobeandmail.com.

Communicate directly

A teammate consistently turns in assignments late. But a tardy report this week could cause your team to lose its funding. To avoid confrontation, you might say “I hope we all turn our work in on time this week.” *The problem:* That statement disguises your real message. And when your tardy teammate receives such an ambiguous message, imagination fills the gaps your words left.

A better way: Instead of avoiding conflict, avoid future problems by addressing the situation directly and immediately. Explain the peril your team faces and ask for a guarantee of timely work and for suggestions of ways you could help your teammate meet that key deadline.

—Adapted from “The True Costs of Indirectness,” *Point Lookout*, Chaco Canyon Consulting, www.chacocanyon.com.

Test yourself

Define these common business terms

Match the following terms with their definitions below:

- a. accrue
- b. affidavit
- c. amortize
- d. consignment
- e. depreciation
- f. invoice
- g. liquidate
- h. overhead
- i. proxy
- j. requisition
- k. transcript
- l. trademark

Definitions:

1. A request in writing for goods or services.
2. A written statement made under oath before an official.
3. To increase or accumulate, as interest.

4. An authorization to act or vote for another.
5. To sell off assets to pay debt.
6. A legally protected symbol or design affixed to a product.
7. To pay off a debt by periodic payments.
8. Goods shipped for future sale while ownership of goods remains with the shipper.
9. A written, typewritten or printed copy of a record or tape-recorded document.
10. The operating expenses of a business, such as rent, utilities, upkeep and taxes.
11. A bill for goods or services sold.
12. A loss in value through ordinary wear and tear.

Answers: a. 3, b. 2, c. 7, d. 8, e. 12, f. 11, g. 5, h. 10, i. 4, j. 1, k. 9, l. 6.

Maintaining integrity

Offer good reasons, not excuses

The phrase “a good excuse” falsely implies a difference between good and bad excuses. All excuses are bad—and therefore unacceptable. By contrast, a reason is a legitimate, truthful account of a situation, including the part that you yourself played.

The next time you must explain a shortcoming or failure, ask yourself these questions to determine if you are about to offer a reason—or simply an excuse:

- **What is your intent?** Are you

aiming to release yourself from blame? Or do you seek to provide an account of the situation and your actions?

- **Are you willing** to accept the consequences of your actions? Are you able to describe the steps you plan to take to improve the situation?

- **Do your words** honestly acknowledge your own responsibility? Have you described what you could have done differently?

—Adapted from “Explain Yourself!” Joy Fisher-Sykes, *OnPoint*, www.thesykesgrp.com.

Polishing presentations

Deliver a dynamic finish to your speech

Although you may deliver your most important points during the middle of a presentation, your effectiveness as a speaker depends largely on your final words. Use these tips to maintain connections with listeners even as they exit the room:

- **Be brief.** When you say “In conclusion,” make sure you really mean it. You will lose your audience’s attention if you continue speaking long after you announce that you are finishing.

- **Review, but don’t rewind.** Don’t confuse your audience by introducing new material in your conclusion even if you think of new data to support your earlier points. Your con-

clusion has three purposes: to summarize the main points, to reiterate your general purpose, and to deliver an exit line that spurs your audience to act or to keep thinking as they exit.

- **Maintain your connection.** Deliver your conclusion without reading it—look at your audience as you end, without fumbling with your notes or otherwise distracting listeners from your words. Your conclusion should raise the emotional connection you have created, so seize the opportunity to move from behind the lectern and toward your audience as you speak.

—Adapted from “The End Is the Beginning,” Stephen Boyd, www.sboyd.com.

Introducing change

Imbue change with staying power

If you truly want to implement widespread changes at your organization, create a change action team to solve problems and improve systems. Set up a four-week plan that allows the team to concentrate on the change area, meeting according to this schedule:

- **Week 1.** Develop a clear definition of the problem, research the issue and gather related data. Discuss budget concerns and examine different possibilities.
- **Week 2.** Use that time to review the issues and the data, identifying

new procedures, updates or changes required for reporting and measurement systems. That will allow you to monitor progress as you execute the change.

- **Week 3.** Finalize the new procedures, drafting written guidelines for newly required actions.
- **Week 4.** Create and circulate final drafts of all procedures. Craft an implementation plan and share it with those involved in the change.

— Adapted from “The Right Way to Solve Problems,” John Mautner, Cycle of Success Institute, www.advancedprofit.net.

Communicating clearly

Add conviction to your communication

Eliminate the following bad habits to communicate with strength and clarity:

- **Uncertainty.** Phrases such as *kind of* and *sort of* communicate uncertainty and inability to form clear thoughts. *Power play:* Replace “I kind of have a problem with your idea” with a clear, strong and accurate message. Say: “I have concerns about your suggestion. Can you please tell me more about ...”
- **Wishy-washiness.** When you say the words “I will try to ...” you are less often describing a commitment you are willing to make than express-

ing your doubts or unwillingness to see an action or plan through. *Power play:* Use a more active voice to convey your plans. Say “I will call you by Wednesday, and we can discuss the situation more at that time.”

- **Powerlessness.** Saying “I have to ...” implies that you have no control over your actions and choices, thus giving you an excuse if things don’t turn out well. *Power play:* Speak firmly, saying “I will,” “I need to” or “I am” to communicate your plans and intentions.

— Adapted from “Verbal Faux Pas: The Words You Use Can Empower or Confuse,” www.thesykesgrp.com.

Presenting effectively

4 mistakes public speakers make

As you prepare for your next presentation or speaking engagement, plan well to avoid these all-too-common speaking mistakes:

- 1. Lack of preparation.** You were asked to speak because you are knowledgeable about the topic, but that does not mean you know how to organize and present your knowledge. *Set this goal:* Prepare for at least a half hour for every minute you will be speaking.
- 2. Eagerness to please everyone.** No matter how prepared you are or how thorough your presentation, you will never please everyone in the audience. *Remember:* If you try too hard to win everyone over, your presentation will suffer.

- 3. Microphone avoidance.** Some speakers say “My voice carries well—

I don’t need to use the mike.” That’s a mistake. Without amplification and the ability to vary your voice volume, you jeopardize your presentation. *Note:* Arrive early enough to test the system and adjust as needed.

- 4. Evaluation misinterpretation.** If you ask audience members to anonymously rate or comment on your presentation, you can expect to find at least a few comments that are far from complimentary. *Caution:* Don’t let negative feedback devastate you. Take heed of constructive feedback and pay attention to patterns, but disregard aberrant negativity in the face of general approval.

— Adapted from “The Ten Biggest Mistakes Presenters Make,” Chris King, www.onlineorganizing.com.

Words in action

■ **Skilled vs. skillful.** Both words imply possession of a skill, but *skilled* most often is used in reference to *specialized training or education*, as gained by a craftsman or technician: “We hire only skilled accountants.” *Skillful*, on the other hand, means *showing proficiency, knowledge or aptitude*: “A skillful persuader, Jack usually got his way.”

Keep cool under fire

When someone reacts hotly to your words, take the three-A approach to keep the situation from escalating:

- **Acknowledge** that you heard the person’s comments by pausing, nodding or verbally responding—but without blaming or labeling. Your goal: to buy time for you both to cool off.
- **Ask** for more information. Seek common ground based on the other person’s underlying concerns or needs.
- **Add** your own perspective. Ask “May I give you my take on the situation?” That puts the other person in the position of granting you permission to state your view.

— Adapted from “Keeping Cool While Under Fire,” Kare Anderson, www.sayitbetter.com.

Criticism tactic

Criticism: The mere word inspires a knee-jerk reaction. Overcome employees’ natural defensive reaction by offering praise before you criticize. *Compare these examples:*

- **“Your report was due last Wednesday,** and I haven’t received it yet. Please submit it immediately.”
- **“Your reports are always on time**—in fact, they’re usually early. What happened this month? Although the report was due last Wednesday, I haven’t received it yet. I need you to submit it immediately.”

Bottom line: The second example is just as urgent as the first, but most people would find it easier to accept. And they will be inclined to respond to you in a spirit of cooperation rather than from a defensive position.

— *From the editors.*

Irritation-ender

Do you dread encounters with a chronically cranky co-worker? Change your approach.

Instead of taking the other person's behavior personally and becoming irritated by it, feel compassion. If you tell yourself "Wow, he must be having a really bad day" or "It must feel awful to be so negative," you will find it easier to avoid becoming upset.

— Adapted from "Top Tips on How to Avoid Being Irritated," *Rachel's Reflections*, www.rachelgreen.com.

Critical response

The best way to deal with overly critical people is to offer them ample opportunity to express themselves. *Take this approach:*

- **Stop resisting.** Remember the saying "What you resist persists," and prepare yourself to listen to what your critic has to say.

- **Embrace your critic.** Asking for your critic's opinion, rather than waiting to hear it, will help you address concerns before they fester.

— Adapted from "Embrace Your Critics," Lora Adriane, *Relating@Work*, www.connectionscoach.com.

Inform employees

Put yourself in your staffers' shoes. What would you want to hear if you were in their place? Employees typically are eager to stay on top of the following information:

- How the organization is doing. Inform workers how the organization compares to competitors and alert them to changing industry trends.

- Any changes—large or small—in direction, strategy or priorities.

- When someone important to their work existence is joining or leaving the organization or is doing something that will affect them.

- How the group's priorities, goals and objectives fit into the organization's overall plan.

- How the group is doing against goals and expectations.

- Individual contributions that have helped elevate the team's overall performance.

- What's on your mind—and what's on your plate.

— Adapted from *The Career Troubleshooter*, Sherrie Gong Taguchi, AMACOM, www.amanet.org/books.

Climbing the ladder

Highlight your skills to advance

When you are angling for inclusion on a special project team—or for a promotion—start by preparing or updating your CV, or curriculum vitae.

Consisting of 50 to 80 words and written in the third person, your personal profile should summarize your career status and progression, as well as major successes and areas of expertise. While your statements should all be fact-based, this isn't the time to be modest.

First, think of 10 skills you have developed that would be applicable to the position you desire. Examples include communication, leadership, decision making, time management

and negotiating. Then consider what three things motivate you most, avoiding obvious ones such as salary, perks or power. Focus on ideas such as learning new skills, working as part of a team or meeting tight deadlines.

After comparing your CV to the official description of the position you desire, you may share your ambition with the search committee or your manager to demonstrate that you have the qualities the position requires.

— Adapted from "Making Your Pitch," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, www.pressandjournal.co.uk.

Communicating with customers

Avoid these order-form mistakes

You can do everything right—at every step of the sale—and still lose customers before they tell you "Yes." Need proof? Notice how many online sales are abandoned at the order form or shopping cart page.

Bottom line: Your order form should make buying from you as easy as possible. Avoid these common errors, and you will be on your way toward creating order forms that close the sale:

- **Calling it an "order form."** Think of a more enticing headline to draw customers in. *Examples:* risk-free trial form, (product name) acceptance form and activation request.

- **Using the wrong voice.** Write

your order form using the customer's own excited voice. *Example:* "Yes, sign me up for a free trial sample ..."

- **Making it too complicated.** How much information do you really need from customers to begin the order process? Typically, the less information you ask for, the easier customers find ordering to be. Names and e-mail addresses are often enough. And of course you should ask for phone numbers if you intend to call customers. However, gathering information you don't need can scare some buyers away.

— Adapted from "Order Forms That Make the Sale," Yanik Silver, www.smartbiz.com.

Resolving people problems

Muzzle chatty co-workers

Nonstop talkers have no sense of time. They ask you for "a moment" of your time and then proceed to ramble on endlessly. The following tips and tactics allow you to treat them courteously while still demonstrating your need to end the encounter:

- **Offer nonverbal cues.** If you continue working and resist making eye contact, many chatterers will take the hint and leave. *Another approach:* Check your watch repeatedly or start packing your briefcase, signaling departure plans.

- **Be direct.** Explain why you cannot hold a conversation at this time. Say: "I can't talk right now. I am in

the middle of a project that is due tomorrow. Can we talk later?"

- **Set limits.** Tell your co-worker: "I have five minutes. What can we cover in that amount of time?" Stick to your time limit, excusing yourself when the five minutes have passed.

- **Compliment the chatterer.** Say: "What you are saying sounds worth discussing in detail. Please put your recommendations in writing so that I may share them with others in tomorrow's managers' meeting."

— Adapted from "Muzzling the Motor Mouths," Bill Lampton, *Championship Communication*, www.championshipcommunication.com.

Power writing

Making sense of executive summaries

If your written report is intended for more than one reader, count on each reader taking a different approach to the document. While some will pay great attention to detail, others will be satisfied with a broad overview. For those readers, an executive summary is ideal. *Build your summary around these three sections:*

• **Statement of purpose.** Describe in simple terms the reason you wrote the report. Be as brief as possible; one succinct sentence is ideal.

• **Statement of scope.** Set the boundaries for your subject and purpose. For example, if you are reporting on just one aspect of a far-reaching pro-

ject, your statement of scope should point out not only what your report covers but also what it omits.

• **Finding and conclusions.** Briefly summarize what you cover in the main report. Don't attempt to summarize every page—your so-called summary will become unwieldy and much too big for its purpose. Instead, pull out each conclusion described in your report, citing page and section references so that readers can easily locate more information in the full report if desired.

— Adapted from "Make Your Report Reader-Friendly With an Executive Summary," *Communi-keys*, Helen Wilkie, www.mhw.com.com.

Boosting creativity

Guidelines for brilliant brainstorming

Follow these suggestions and you will never again subject your staffers to a creativity-killing, unproductive brainstorming session:

• **Don't look for one big idea.** View brainstorming not only as a chance to harvest ideas but also to combine and extend them. The power of group creativity comes from inviting people with different ideas to share, blend and expand their diverse knowledge.

• **Allow individual effort too.** Ideas sprout from a blend of individual and collective creativity. Build in

time for people to think and learn about the topic before the group brainstorming session, and allow time to reflect on ideas generated during the meeting—before agreeing on a final decision.

• **Take action.** Brainstorming is of little value unless it is combined with observing customers, interviewing experts and building prototypes that test the proposed ideas.

— Adapted from "The Truth About Brainstorming," Robert Sutton, *BusinessWeek*, www.businessweek.com.

Read 'em & reap

■ **Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies** by Nikos Mourkogiannis goes beyond strategy and beyond leadership to home in on the one attribute every organization needs to build success: purpose. Using well-known, successful organizations as examples, the book identifies four ways of defining purpose: discovery of the new, excellence, heroism and altruism. Through engaging examples, Mourkogiannis explains how to discover purpose in your personal leadership style and turn commitment into action with lasting results. \$27.95, Palgrave Macmillan, www.palgrave.com.

Enable performance

Productivity will falter if confusion erupts in any of the following areas:

• **Clarity.** Clearly define team or organizational goals and priorities for employees.

• **Commitment.** Enable workers to buy into and support those goals.

• **Translation.** Ensure that people understand what they must do as individuals to assist the team in reaching its goals.

• **Accountability.** Remind co-workers to hold one another accountable for results.

— Adapted from *The 8th Habit*, Stephen Covey, Free Press, www.simonsays.com.

Protect priorities

You're swamped—and someone just asked you to take on one more project. *Protect your priorities with this three-step approach:*

1. If you can commit to doing the task with 100% certainty of meeting the commitment, say "Yes."

2. If you can't commit with 100% certainty, say "No."

3. If you are undecided, ask for more information. For example, ask "How much time will it require?" or "What duties does the task encompass?"

— Adapted from "Never Enough Time?" Marian York, www.mywordpower.com.



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Quote of the month

"We must use time as a tool, not as a couch."

John F. Kennedy
35th President of the
United States of America (1917-1963)

More top tips

■ **Encourage engagement** on the job by answering employees' unspoken questions: "What's important around here?" "How can I make a difference?" and "What is in it for me when I do make a difference?"

— Adapted from *The Carrot Principle*, Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton, Free Press, www.simonsays.com.

■ **Pique interest** during a presentation: Use the rule of three when describing new and different ideas and facts. Three fascinating trends will be more meaningful to listeners than 10. If you have 10 trends to describe, highlight three and provide listeners with background information on the others.

— Adapted from *Present Like a Pro*, Cyndi Maxey and Kevin O'Connor, St. Martin's Griffin, www.stmartins.com.

■ **Control anger** with a simple to-do list. On index cards, jot down six things you need to do when you start feeling hot under the collar: breathe, slow down, listen and so on. Review your ideas often, and the six steps will become second nature.

— From the editors.

■ **Redefine "empathy"** to encompass caring enough to confront others in a timely and consistent fashion. Talk to people rather than about them, and you eliminate the resentment and discomfort that occurs when problems fester.

— Adapted from "Dealing With Your Difficult People," Terry Paulson, www.terrypaulson.com.

■ **Foster improvements** by remembering to ask—no matter how well a project is going—"How can I make this even better?"

— From the editors.

Improving productivity

6 steps to better problem solving

Take these steps to lead your group through a problem-solving session:

1. **Discuss the problem.** State the problem, and then invite teammates to describe their experiences with similar problems. A teammate's past experience with similar problems can point the team toward a solution.

2. **Define the problem's source.** Encourage teammates to brainstorm. Focus on clarifying any and all root causes, probing for more information by encouraging the team to consider unfamiliar angles. Uncovering the root causes provides a checklist for evaluating potential solutions.

3. **Evaluate the benefits of solving the problem.** Teammates must understand how doing so will benefit them personally and improve working conditions on the team. If teammates don't see any benefit, they won't buy in to the problem-solving effort.

4. **Brainstorm possible solutions.** Invite teammates to contribute

suggestions for solving the problem. Don't allow them to concentrate yet on implementing those ideas; everyone should remain neutral at this point regarding whether solutions are realistic and actionable.

5. **Choose your approach.** Keep in mind that the best solution may be a hybrid of several individually unworkable ideas. Guide teammates to keep the best of their ideas, referring back to your checklist to confirm that solutions address the problem's causes.

6. **Chart action steps.** Answer these questions: "What is the first thing we need to do?" and "What is the next thing we need to do?" and so on. Develop an action plan that includes responsibilities, due dates, a communication system and an overall project schedule that everyone agrees to support.

— Adapted from "Leading Teams to Wise Decisions," Roger Herman, *Doors and Hardware*, www.dhi.org.

Training effectively

Orient new employees for success

When you bring new workers on board, follow these tips to lay the groundwork for success:

- **Introduce the new worker yourself.** That shows respect for both the new employee and your current workers.

- **Review expectations.** You probably spent time writing a job description and defining parameters. Don't forget to share them.

- **Don't go it alone.** No one said you had to handle orientation on your own. You may decide to cover the new worker's goals and strategies yourself. But you still can assign other sections to

seasoned employees and/or teams. New employees will meet their co-workers, and veterans will value the chance to help new workers succeed.

- **Schedule the orientation plan.** Once you have developed a program and assigned "teachers," assign dates for each part of the program. On the first day, give the new employee the dates and times for orientation. Then make it the new hire's responsibility to follow through.

— Adapted from *The Boss's Survival Guide*, Bob Rosner, Allan Halcrow and Alan Levins, McGraw-Hill, www.books.mcgraw-hill.com.

Advanced networking

Build a success-oriented network

Networking is a productive strategy for growing your business—if the people in your network are as committed as you are to the network's success. Vet potential network partners by asking them questions such as the following:

- "Will you attend meetings?"
- "Will you bring qualified guests?"
- "Will you introduce your network partners to your business contacts?"

- "How serious are you about making a commitment—in both time and energy—to this group?"

- "Do you have enough contacts in your business circle to bring guests who could have a significant impact on the group or who possibly could join the group at some point?"

— Adapted from *One Phone Call Away*, Jeffrey W. Meshel with Douglas Garr, Portfolio, www.penguin.com.