

Keeping it real

Sugar coating just confuses the message

Authentic communications – it’s a term that brings to mind a group of Buddhist monks calmly conversing in a Zen-like way just beyond our normal human ability. Being “authentic”, it seems, is a place to which we haven’t quite evolved. But if we don’t know what it feels like to be completely authentic, how are we supposed to communicate in an authentic way – you know, without hurting people’s feelings, stepping on toes or causing any discomfort whatsoever?

The lack of productivity resulting from murky communications is one of the biggest problems I see in organizations. It’s the confusion that arises from people not saying what they mean. They’re side stepping, high leveling and sugar-coating the message so much that the recipient is left to just nod and pretend he/she agrees. It’s not our fault. We’ve all been conditioned from an early age to ‘say something nice or don’t say anything at all’. I just don’t think that’s working for us anymore. We need to figure out how to say what it is we want to say – in a clear, mindful, respectful way – that leaves everyone on the same page and ready to move forward. It’s time to evolve.

Which reminds me of a story.

From the time my son began eating solid food, I started hiding flax oil in it. Flax oil is rich in healthy omega fatty acids that help with brain development, good skin and a host of other health benefits. As he moved from pureed vegetables to more solid fare, it became harder to hide. I mixed it with yogurt, apple sauce, even peanut butter. But oil has a tendency to rise and when he started refusing the strange looking substance, I graduated to blending fancy fruit shakes served in covered sippie cups. One day I was out of yogurt and didn’t have time to make a smoothie. I was anxious to give him his daily flax oil quotient but unsure how. Finally, with all conceivable avenues expended, I did the unthinkable. I poured out a teaspoonful of flax oil and offered it to him, straight up. When he asked what it was, I told him it was a teaspoon of flax oil. He took it like medicine and didn’t even flinch.

I read in a book called *Crafting Stories for Children*

that “specificity creates authenticity”. According to the book, the more detailed we writers can be in crafting our fiction, anchoring each scene in time and place, the more authentic the story. That makes sense. So does that mean that the more detailed we are in how we communicate with each other, the more authentic we are being? I think if your intention is clear and you’ve picked relevant details to support your message, then yes, you are on your way to communicating with authenticity.

Let’s try this out. For the next week start ending each of your statements (either out loud or to yourself) with the question: “What, specifically am I trying to say?” Then add in the details you left out the first time around.

It helps to have a sounding board when you’re preparing for an important conversation or presentation that you need to get right. I was recently working with a client who was preparing for a particularly sensitive presentation. He was leaning toward a watered-down version around one of the points. We tried an exercise where I asked him to give me the two extremes of what he proposed saying. The first version would be the sugar-coated version and the second would be complete facts, all cards on the table, here’s what he thought. When he rehearsed the sugar-coated version I had no idea what he was saying. The second version with all of the facts (which initially felt to him like he was going too far), ended up coming across

as professional and refreshing. He later reported that the second version worked like a charm in his presentation. He had anchored the facts. It came across as authentic.

Questions for Reflection

What are you hiding when you’re sugar coating something?

How is that serving you?

How would providing more details in your communications support your business goals?

How would it strengthen your leadership style?

Where, specifically, do you want to begin to try this idea out?

How will you know when you’ve been successful? 🍷



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