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LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW WE TALK:
COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS IN THE LIBRARY WORKPLACE

Kabel Nathan Stanwicks

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Introduction

Word choice, body language, non-verbal cues, how one initiates a conversation, locations in which people hold discussions, one's inherent communication style, and the method used to deliver communication—among many other things—can make or break a conversation or an interaction. In some cases, our choices for delivering communication can have such a negative effect on the person receiving the communication that significant interpersonal conflict can arise between the sender and the receiver of that communication.

In the workplace, differences in communication styles among staff in a diverse workforce can lead to conflict. Preferences for particular communication methods and styles, as well as the use of words and phrases, vary among generations and individuals. One person may view that which constitutes good communication to another person, as poor communication; words that seem harmless to someone may hold negative connotations for someone else. Lakoff, van Kleef, and Lancaster & Stillman examine these misunderstandings from cultural, emotional, and generational perspectives, respectively. Generational lexical differences, such as slang and word associations, can lead to communication problems and misunderstandings between people from different generations (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003). People decode communication using their own cultural backgrounds as a frame of reference to understand and interpret communication they receive, rather than decoding communication from a sender's cultural perspective, which makes miscommunication and misunderstanding between people of different cultures unavoidable (Lakoff, 1990). People can notice their own and others' emotional states and changes in emotional states; however, people are not always capable of understanding their own emotions or other people's emotions (Van Kleef, 2016). The

latter is tied to one's emotional intelligence. How do individuals in an organization overcome differences in communication styles and preferences to improve their interpersonal relationships with one another, and improve their ability to work well as part of a team? With so many communication mechanisms to choose from, how does one know which mechanism to employ at any given time?

These generational, cultural, and emotional differences in communication can lead to communication barriers and conflict between individual employees. However, it is possible for employees to avoid significant conflicts that may be caused by—or repair interpersonal relationships that have been damaged by—miscommunication and misunderstandings. This is accomplished by developing an understanding of, and learning how to move past, these communication barriers. One approach to dealing with this is to provide employees with the opportunity to venture into the emotional realm with one another. Provide employees with the chance to have honest conversations about how they encode and decode communication, prefer to give and receive feedback, interpret certain gestures, react to words and phrases, and prefer to be approached by others to initiate successful conversations. Listening to others and respecting their opinions are important skills for building successful relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). This can be accomplished, in part, by getting library employees to discuss how they like, and do not like, to send and receive communication, as well as how they react emotionally when they encounter communication approaches that differ from their own. It is important that employees discuss their emotions in the workplace (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). Library employees can strengthen their interpersonal relationships by discussing their communication preferences and emotional responses to communication styles.

As the library workforce becomes increasingly diversified (e.g., generationally, racially, culturally), institutions need to work on developing emotionally competent employees and fostering strong workplace relationships by providing employees with the skills necessary to listen to, communicate with, and respect others' opinions (Johnson & Johnson, 2010; Kram & Cherniss, 2001). Effective communication in the library workplace can be achieved by asking employees to tell their coworkers how to effectively communicate with them, as well as communication approaches to which they are not receptive. Managers need to encourage their employees to learn how to communicate effectively with each other, and they need to lead the way by setting the example. Once people understand how their coworkers prefer to communicate, they can tailor the communication methods and styles they use to meet their coworkers' needs, or they can work out a compromise on how they will communicate with their coworkers. Employees become more perceptive to the communication they receive and more sensitive of the communication they send when they understand the nuances in their colleagues' communication styles—understanding communication at this level can help employees increase their emotional intelligences.

Shortly after I began managing a large department in an academic library, I attended a workshop titled *How to Communicate Effectively with Your Employees*. This workshop focused on a concept that the trainer referred to as a communication contract, which was a mechanism for communicating within the supervisor-supervisee relationship. I later combined the general concept of an agreement, or contract for communicating, with concepts from communication and organizational studies literature to develop a process to improve communication between two people, assist people in

resolving interpersonal and workplace conflict, help people discover and overcome their largest personal impediments to effectively communicate with others, and therefore, improve a group's ability to work together.

Each employee needs a management style adapted to his or her needs and the task at hand (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). The same can be said for how people communicate with one another, so I engaged employees in discussions about their communication preferences. This information was used to assist employees in creating individualized communication agreements with me and with one another. I began this process by engaging my direct reports in communication agreements. Then I used this tool to address communication problems between staff members who were experiencing significant interpersonal conflict—caused by differences in communication styles attributed to generational, cultural, and gender differences—with each other. Shortly after establishing these initial communication agreements between my direct reports and me, and between staff members who were not communicating well with each other, staff members in my department requested the broader establishment of communication agreements among themselves. The effectiveness of these communication agreements was demonstrated by improvement in employees' abilities to interact with each other, improvement in employees' abilities to resolve workplace conflicts on their own, through feedback forms used to assess these communication agreements, and through staff members' requests to establish communication agreements with other staff members in the department.

The Communication Agreement Defined

I define a communication agreement as a set of individualized guidelines for cooperative communication between, and established by, two people. The communication agreement seeks to create a comfortable environment in which two employees can communicate openly with one another by expanding employees' understandings of how and why their coworkers communicate the way they do, and how their communication is interpreted by their coworkers. McGrath, Arrow, and Berdahl (1999) describe how a process such as this can lead to what they refer to as high *integrative complexity*; they write, "...coordination of understandings allows for the recognition of differences and the sometimes taxing process of finding connections that link and make sense of apparently incompatible views. When this process works, the outcome is high 'integrative complexity'" (p. 11). The communication agreement also gives employees a tool to bridge generational divides created by language. Lancaster & Stillman (2003) state:

Asking the other generations what they mean by certain generational words and phrases creates an invitation to communicate. The meanings each generation assigns to words provide snapshots of the events and conditions that shaped a generation's values and attitudes, which are the foundation for how each of us behaves on the job and in our everyday lives (p. 317).

A communication agreement begins with a guided discussion, in which participants describe their preferred communication styles and methods, how they prefer to give and receive feedback and constructive criticism, talk about what—if anything—each person feels is lacking or could be improved upon in their current communication with each other, and what employees can consider changing about the way they communicate to deliver more effective communication.

People attach different meanings to messages; therefore, effective communication relies on how well people understand the meanings that others attach to words and phrases when exchanging communication (Gudykunst, 1994). The communication agreement provides participants with an understanding of how they encode and decode communication. The guided discussion draws out personal thoughts, feelings, and reactions to words and phrases, as well as reactions to communication styles and mechanisms. The process exposes information that people usually do not share with others, and the agreement that this process establishes allows the participants to customize their communication with each other based on one another's preferences and newfound understanding of how each participant may interpret or react to communication. The communication agreement improves what Powers & Lowry (1984) refer to as *communication fidelity* (p. 58) between two people. It also highlights the importance of two-way relational activities, in which participants contribute equally and take on roles of both expert and learner (Kram & Cherniss, 2001), when it comes to building relationships between two people.

I chose to coin this a communication agreement, rather than the communication contract presented in the workshop I attended, for a very specific reason. While I encourage people to abide by what is outlined in their communication agreements, I stress the need for people to maintain a continuous and open dialogue about their communication preferences. Learning how to interact and work within a heterogeneous relationship requires that people engage in reflection, active listening, and self-assessment—this will help the relationship succeed and can help an individual build greater social competencies (Kram & Cherniss, 2001). Furthermore, nurturing these

relationships through discussions enhances participants' emotional intelligence as doing so can help boost self-awareness and social skills (Kram & Cherniss, 2001). I have asked those with whom I have developed communication agreements to be flexible, recognize that communication preferences may change over time, and communication agreements will need to be revised as relationships evolve. Although the terms *contract* and *agreement* are somewhat synonymous, the term *contract* carries with it the implication of a fixed, written document or agreement, whereas the term *agreement* can mean something binding but does not need to be committed to paper. Since an agreement can be more informal than a contract, it is less intimidating for people participating in this process, and it is easier to revise or expand an agreement as the need arises.

Benefits to Using Communication Agreements

There are numerous benefits to using communication agreements in the library workplace. Employees become self-sufficient and improve their ability to self-manage in that they can work through projects and problems without a facilitator guiding them through discussions, which—in turn—enhances employees' collaborative abilities. Employees can boost their emotional intelligences—specifically self-awareness and social skills—by creating and using communication agreements. Employees learn how to effectively communicate with a diverse group of colleagues, and these skills can transfer to interactions with other library colleagues, library users, and people outside of the library workplace.

Libraries are rapidly changing environments, in which employees at all levels of an organization need to be capable of collaborating with others throughout the organization to effectively and efficiently move an organization and the profession

forward. Libraries' organizational cultures need to change to address generational and technological changes (Maloney, Antelman, Arlitsch & Butler, 2010, p. 337). One can argue that in today's library workplace, the model in which a lower-level library employee performs very specialized work within his or her silo, and under very specific instructions from a supervisor, is no longer sustainable. Jobs have largely transitioned from physical labor to knowledge work throughout the global economy. This shift has required employees to take on more advanced work, show greater initiative, and exercise increased self-management over what was previously asked of them (Branden, 1994). I believe these developments also require library employees to work more collaboratively—my staff members see their work intersecting with others' work in ways not previously seen. The communication agreement gives library employees an effective tool that empowers them to work through problems and conflict that may arise as the result of these newer demands placed upon them.

Employees need to find common ground and understand one another in their workplace communication. Individuals are deeply-rooted in their communication approaches and styles, and it is challenging to learn and embrace new approaches to communication. However, employees can risk offending or confusing one another if they remain fixed in their communication styles (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003).

Communication agreements help employees recognize the impact word choice and communication style can have on colleagues. Employees learn to select an appropriate communication style given the subject at hand and tailored to the person or group of people with whom they must communicate. Those receiving communication are also more receptive to the message being sent when it is tailored in this way. I have noticed

that employees are more willing to work with people, with whom they have avoided partnering in the past, after they establish communication agreements. This fosters respectful group discussions, collaborative decision-making, and trust between employees.

A manager can spend a great deal of time managing interpersonal conflicts in research universities (Stanley & Algert, 2007, p. 49). Some conflict can be caused by the approaches employees take to discuss problems that occurred in the workplace. The initial problem, which the employees attempt to discuss, fuels a persistent discord—the manner in which employees discuss and resolve problems between themselves. These conflicts are caused by individuals' personal communication styles, one's tone of voice, and words or phrases that are used.

My employees would take one of two approaches to deal with workplace conflict before I established communication agreements among them. They would either share a one-sided story with a supervisor and request an immediate intervention, or they would attempt to confront the issue with other employees involved in the conflict. The latter usually lead to additional conflict because employees approached these situations using their personal communication styles, which differed from their colleagues' communication styles. As a supervisor, I worked with employees to resolve the problems that they brought to me. However, it became clear that a broader issue was exacerbating conflict between employees—interpersonal communication between employees triggered emotional responses and generated additional conflict. This broader, emotional issue was not adequately addressed in the context of resolving a workplace logistical problem—this was an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1994, p. 35). It is not possible to separate the work

and personal domains in the workplace; therefore, leaders need to find ways to engage employee's emotional lives (Kegan and Lahey, 2009, p. xiv). I understood that I needed to help my employees harness, and work with, their emotions to produce a better workplace.

Once employees established communication agreements with each other, they were able to communicate better with each other, resolve problems that arose, and avoid additional conflict caused by their personal approaches to communication. Employees knew how to approach each other and carry out conversations about problems that came up in the workplace. They were able to focus on the issues at hand, avoid generating interpersonal conflicts caused by their approaches to communicating with one another, and they were able to resolve problems on their own. If a communication issue came up while working through a problem, employees could discuss and resolve the communication issue and then return to solving the main problem at hand.

Facilitating Communication Agreements

A certain amount of preparation is necessary for a successful communication discussion. Running a good communication discussion and establishing a successful communication agreement is a difficult undertaking. Participants need to feel at ease with the facilitator and the process before engaging in a discussion about their communication with each other. The facilitator must understand the participants' communication needs with each other, and determine how to effectively guide the process to build consensus between the two participants.

My experiences helping others establish communication agreements have helped me develop strategies for facilitating communication discussions. If I am going to

facilitate a communication agreement between people with whom I work, or between people who work for me, I establish my own communication agreements with these individuals first. I find that this improves each participant's comfort level with the communication agreement process, and it improves each participant's comfort level with me as a facilitator. I discovered the importance of this step early on. I did not establish my own communication agreements with each participant beforehand when I initially facilitated communication agreements for other people. I noticed that participants were not as willing to openly answer questions and describe their personal communication preferences when I had not established communication agreements between myself and each participant. This created a power imbalance, in which I was familiar with each participant's communication preferences, but the participants were not familiar with my communication preferences. Participants cannot improve their communication with the facilitator without knowledge of the facilitator's communication preferences, and participants perceived that I held an unfair advantage in my communication with them.

I use a set of questions—some of which I pull from a standard question set that I created for communication discussions (Figure 1), and others that are tailored to the participants—to guide the communication discussion. It is helpful to distribute these questions to the participants ahead of time to give participants adequate time to think through and formulate answers to these questions. I meet with the participants individually once they have had sufficient time to formulate responses to these questions. We discuss their answers, thoughts, and feelings about the questions and the process, and I use this information to better shape and guide the communication discussion. The communication agreement seeks to establish a distinct set of guidelines for each pair of

participants; therefore, someone's responses to these questions may differ when working through communication issues with different people. I hold these preliminary discussions with the participants even if I have established a communication agreement with one or both of them, or if I have helped them establish a communication agreement with someone else. I also offer participants an opportunity to formulate communication questions for one another, and I facilitate the exchange of these questions before we convene for the communication discussion.

The process of establishing a communication agreement can be a nerve-racking experience for some people in that it requires participants to reveal information about themselves that people do not usually freely share in a work environment (Muchinsky, 2000, p. 802). It is up to the person leading this process, the facilitator, to make sure the participants feel as relaxed as possible. Holding these discussions in a private, neutral setting—avoiding personal offices, rooms in public view, and formal meeting rooms—can help ease participants' anxiety. At the beginning of the meeting, establish clear ground rules for the discussion (e.g., one person speaks at a time, be respectful, listen, do not interrupt, keep the discussion confidential) and confirm with each participant that he or she will follow the ground rules. When guiding a communication discussion between two employees, one needs to maintain a facilitative role in the process—guide the discussion, remain neutral, and do not side with either participant if asked to do so—and make this role apparent to participants. Each participant needs to walk away from the discussion with a clear understanding of the other person's communication preferences; therefore, if a participant makes a vague or unclear statement, ask clarifying questions to resolve ambiguity.

A good facilitator has high emotional intelligence, can be unbiased, and is perceptive to participants' verbal and non-verbal cues. The facilitator should be well-versed in the potential communication differences (e.g., generational, cross-cultural, gender) that can affect participants' communication with each other. It may be helpful for a facilitator to be familiar enough with participants to have knowledge of their communication styles and be able to discern the truthfulness of participants' responses. However, the facilitator should not be too familiar or friendly with an individual participant so that the other participant may perceive the facilitator as biased. Supervisors facilitating discussions for or with supervisees must be mindful of the supervisor-supervisee power dynamics. The supervisor acting as facilitator will not be able to successfully usher participants through the communication agreement process if participants feel that the supervisor is exercising his or her supervisory powers while facilitating the communication discussion. The facilitator must be able to distinguish if participants feel that they have been coerced into participating in the process, do not want to engage in the process, or are not honest with their responses to discussion questions. If the facilitator lacks the perceptive communication skills necessary to recognize this, the process outcome may do more harm than good to participants' interpersonal relationships.

Using the Communication Agreement for Conflict Management

The communication agreement provides a useful means for people to mend a relationship and communicate after they experience a significant interpersonal conflict. Avoid convening a communication discussion between two people immediately after a conflict; give the employees time to process their emotions and construct an

understanding of the conflict they experienced (Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004). Employees will have a more productive discussion and develop a better communication agreement when given time to temper their emotions and separate themselves from the event. The communication agreement process is not intended to resolve past conflict; it is intended to improve current communication, help participants understand how communication approaches may have fueled their conflict, and aid people in working through future conflict. Focus the communication discussion on the present and future, rather than reexamining past events, when using the agreement to heal a workplace relationship.

That being said, the communication agreement process can help participants identify why they experienced conflict when miscommunication or differences in communication styles are a source of conflict. This fresh understanding can make it easier for them to resolve their conflict. I allow participants to cite examples from prior communications to illustrate their thoughts and ideas about their communication preferences, but participants are not allowed to use the discussion to vent about previous interactions with each other—this is established in the ground rules. A fine line can exist between illustrative examples and venting about previous interactions; unfortunately, citing illustrative examples can lead to heated debates. The facilitator must be prepared for a communication discussion to take an uncomfortable turn and be able to restore calm to the meeting if this occurs.

Intergenerational Communication & Conflict

Different generations have different vocabularies and different expectations of how others should communicate with them. Emotional exchanges can erupt between

employees when these expectations are not met. I have assisted employees in developing communication agreements with one another, following situations like this, to help them understand their colleagues' different styles and improve their interpersonal communication with one another. They develop an appreciation for each other's approaches and an understanding of generational differences. They negotiate a compromise on communication approaches to use with each other. Employees need time and patience to explore and embrace communication styles that vary from their own personal communication styles, and they need to practice tailoring their communication to meet their colleagues' needs when implementing new communication agreements.

Cross-Cultural Communication & Conflict

Gudykunst (1994) discusses the importance of effective communication in resolving conflict:

we need to try to communicate as effectively as possible. There are two sides to effective communication. First, we need to *adapt our messages* so that the other person can accurately interpret them. Second, we need to make sure that we *understand the other person*. This requires that our perceptions be as accurate as possible (p. 204-205).

I have used the communication agreement many times to address conflict between employees, and I have found the communication agreement to be helpful when working through conflict stemming from cultural misunderstandings. People generally do not recognize misunderstandings caused by cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal cues (Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004). Participants and facilitators need to be aware of this when exploring these communication differences and the conflict they generate. Conflict resolution through dialogue and conversation is a primarily Western approach (Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004). It is important to respect individuals' cultural

preferences and approaches to dealing with conflict resolution. Participants should enter the communication agreement process on their own accord and not feel pressured to participate in the process. This is especially important when using the communication agreement to work through cross-cultural communication issues and conflicts. The communication agreement can be offered as one approach to managing cross-cultural conflict; however, supervisors need to be mindful of different cultures' approaches to conflict resolution and open to exploring other options.

Communication discussions have helped employees understand each other's actions in the instances I have used communication agreements to address conflict caused by cross-cultural communication issues. Participants realized that their verbal and non-verbal communication did not convey their intended messages, and they gained a better understanding of their cultural communication differences. Participants were prepared to look past the issue at hand and work toward improving future communication with each other after they established communication agreements.

Evaluating Communication Agreements

The process of establishing a communication agreement can be a challenging and humbling experience. It is helpful to follow up with participants—both informally and formally—after a communication agreement is established. The facilitator can gauge the participants' comfort level with the discussion that took place and their new communication agreement. The facilitator can also determine if either participant has questions or concerns about the discussion, the communication agreement, future communication with the other person, or the process. I informally approach individual

participants one to two days after establishing a communication agreement to ask the following questions:

- How do you feel about the process, the meeting, and your communication agreement?
- Do you feel that you are better able to communicate with the other person, and do you feel comfortable communicating with the other person now?
- Is there anything that was not addressed in the communication discussion that you would still like to address?

Participants need an opportunity to practice communicating with one another using the ideas outlined in their agreement before evaluating their communication agreement's effectiveness. Informally checking in with participants over the course of a two- to three-week period can serve as a reminder to use their communication agreement, and this can help the facilitator gauge when participants are ready to evaluate their communication agreement. I ask participants to complete a questionnaire (Figure 2) to help assess their communication agreement, their experience with the process, and the agreement's effect on their communication. This helps determine if the communication agreement is improving participants' communication with each other or if participants need assistance refining their communication agreement.

These approaches are useful for evaluating individual communication agreements. However, different methods or metrics are needed to assess communication agreements' overall effectiveness in improving interpersonal communication in a library workplace. This also provides an opportunity for future research.

Conclusion

It can be difficult for employees to conform to a strict organizational culture, and forcing conformance can be detrimental to an organization. Employees working in diverse organizations thrive when they can be themselves, express themselves, and learn

from each other (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003, p. 313). People are raised differently, have different life experiences, and possess different values—all of which can drive emotions, and all of which should be embraced in the library workplace. It is challenging for employees to divest themselves of their emotions when entering the workplace each morning (Frost, 2003, p. 2). The library workplace is perpetually changing and requires employees to be in constant communication with each other. Communication approaches and styles vary among generations, cultures, genders, and individuals' backgrounds. The library workforce is a diverse, open, and accepting workforce, and professional organizations strive to further diversify the library workforce. The communication agreement is an important tool that can help employees develop successful interpersonal relationships in the diverse library workplace. Library employees can collaborate better, resolve conflict on their own, and self-manage to a greater degree if they understand how to effectively communicate with coworkers. The communication discussion and agreement empower employees with the knowledge needed to improve their interpersonal communication and respond to the changing landscape in the twenty-first century library workplace.

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Figures

Figure 1. Sample Questions for a Communication Discussion

- How do you prefer to receive communication? (email, face-to-face, telephone, etc.)
- Are there certain methods or styles that you are receptive to when it comes to communication?
- What methods or styles are you not receptive to when it comes to communication?
- What can someone say or how can someone phrase things to generate a productive, forward-moving conversation?
- Do you react negatively to certain phrases or words?
- Are there specific words or phrases that trigger a negative response?
- Are there certain words, phrases, or gestures that upset you and make you feel resistant to pursuing an open conversation?
- Would you like to establish a neutral and comfortable location in which difficult conversations can be held should the need arise? If so, where would you like to meet?
- If a conversation takes an uncomfortable turn, how do you want to approach relocating to a neutral place to continue the conversation?
- How do you like to be praised?
- Are there particular settings in which you like to receive praise?
- What do you like to hear, and what do you not like to hear when someone praises you?
- How do you prefer to praise others?
- What are you receptive to and what are you not receptive to when it comes to discussing perceived performance problems and receiving constructive criticism?
- How do you prefer to be approached about perceived performance problems?
- How do you prefer to offer constructive criticism to others?
- Is there anything that is currently lacking in your communication right now that you feel should be or can be improved? What are some suggestions for improving these issues?

Figure 2. Sample Questions for Evaluating a Communication Agreement

- Do you feel that you and [insert name] have followed the guidelines that you established for communicating with one another? Please provide examples of how the two of you have or have not followed these guidelines.
- Is your communication with [insert name] more effective, less effective, or unchanged since you established your communication agreement? Please describe.
- Has your communication contract improved your comfort level with one another, and do you feel comfortable pursuing difficult conversations with [insert name] on your own in the future?
- At this time, are there communication issues that still need to be addressed? If so, please describe those issues.
- Please describe any recommendations you have for improving this process.