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Communication in Stressful Times



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2020 has been a stressful year. That sentence is a serious contender for Understatement of the Year. Pandemics, politics, and paradigm shifts have provided no shortage of stressful situations. Lives, families, jobs, schools, commerce, and social lives have all been disrupted. The desire for a return to “normal” is clearly an indicator that this is “not normal.”

How we communicate with family, friends, employees, customers, and employers is different in stressful situations. Dr. Vincent Covello of the Center for Risk Communication says that all the communication rules change under stress. The things we say, how we say them, and how they are heard are very different in low-stress situations than they are in high-stress circumstances. A significant body of research suggests that a primary reason for this lies in how we process

information. Under stress, people will lose an average of 80 percent of their capacity to process information.

Covello describes “mental noise” as one of the barriers to communication that is raised when we function under stress. Mental noise is that constant conversation in your brain that never stops. It gets louder and more frantic in stressful situations and crowds out the ability to focus, to think clearly, and even to hear. Covello provides three templates to help address the problems that mental noise creates in our ability to communicate.

His first suggestion is a 27/9/3 rule that should be adhered to in high stress or high-risk situations. Basically, don't talk so much. 27/9/3 says that oral communications should be limited to 27 Words, 9 Seconds, and 3 Messages. Speakers of American English typically speak at about three words per second, so you don't necessarily have to count words...just keep messages short and to the point...and the message should not include more than three items.

This leads to his second high-stress communication template, and that is to restrict messages, ideas, or points to THREE. Thus the rule of three that many of us have heard. Research suggests that in low-stress situations most people can retain about seven sequential items (maybe that's why phone numbers were seven digits), but in stressful situations, the limit drops to three. More than three points are likely to be lost when we're stressed.

Another notion that may date back to Aristotle is the Primacy/Recency idea. When stressed, we are more likely to recall the first thing we heard...and the last. I demonstrate this every year in my UK classroom (which I hope is not too stressful) by reading students a list of 15 to 18 related words or terms and asking them to write down all they can remember. Almost all students will list the last term, most will get the first term, and the middle ones...not so much. I'll even have some terms listed that were not even in the list. At least they are creative. But, the lesson is that people will remember the first and last things you say, and may even make up some stuff from the middle. Primacy/Recency is even more pronounced in high-stress or high-risk situations. Make sure the really important points are made first and last.

Finally, and this is one I remembered from hearing Covello speak about fifteen years ago, is AGL-4. This directly relates to the notion that our processing capacity drops under stress. AGL-4 stands for Average Grade Level minus 4. Under stress, people's comprehension drops by an average of four academic grade levels. Extensive research confirms this, and our own circumstances often provide further proof. People who've received bad medical news, realize later that they didn't remember much after "...cancer..." AGL-4 is a real concept. The stress communication lesson is to keep the conversation simple...simpler than you would in a low-stress world.

Stress communication is different. Primacy/Recency, the Rule of Three, 27/9/3, and AGL-4 are all concepts that can lower, rather than raise, the stress level.

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