

Communications 101

These simple strategies will reduce day-to-day conflict on your farm, increase efficiency, and help get everyone on the same page

BY HELEN LAMMERS-HELPS

Ever feel like other people just don't understand you? Do people on the farm complain that you always misunderstand what they're saying? Does it sometimes feel like you're all speaking different languages?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are not alone. Frustrations around communication are common.

Nor should that surprise us, says Pam Paquet, a B.C.-based psychologist and business consultant, especially since research shows only seven per cent of our message gets conveyed in the words we use.

Half of the message's meaning is actually carried by the tone and pitch of our voice, says Paquet. And 40 per cent gets communicated by our body language, facial expressions, posture and gestures.

When people miss the subtle — and sometimes not so subtle — non-verbal clues, communication fails. The transfer of information from one person to another

to improve your communication skills. Paquet shares tips that can help all of us improve these skills. They are tips we can use both on and off the farm.

First off, Paquet tackles issues created by gender differences and their communication preferences. Although it doesn't always apply, it can be helpful to understand some of the common patterns that lead men to misinterpret their wives' body language or tone of voice. She says the women think they are being clear, but the husbands aren't getting the message. "Men tell me: 'I didn't even know she was angry,'" says Paquet.

Men and women also differ in their expectations, continues Paquet. Men tend to be solutions-focused while women tend to want to talk about a problem before jumping into problem-solving mode. In this case, Paquet says it can be helpful to set a meeting with an agenda at a later time to give people time to cool off and think about the options ahead of time.

“Don't multi-task,” Paquet says. “Don't email or text when someone is talking to you. Sit on your hands, silence your phone... otherwise you will miss something important.”

just doesn't happen. But by developing your awareness of the signs and signals of body language, you will be able to better understand others and reduce the conflict and missed opportunities caused by ineffective communication.

To further complicate matters, though, our age, gender and culture also have an impact on our communication styles, so it's really no wonder there are so many misunderstandings.

And when family members also work together on the farm, the stakes — and the potential payoffs — are even higher.

The good news is that it's never too late

Communication is a two-way street, and whether or not communication is successful depends on how well the information is both transmitted and received. To help ensure the message is received, Paquet emphasizes the importance of giving your full attention to the speaker.

“Don't multitask. Don't email or text when someone is talking to you,” she says. “Sit on your hands, silence your phone or put it away. Do what you need to do. Otherwise you will miss something important and you are asking for trouble,” she says.

Paquet emphasizes the value of active listening. She puts it bluntly: “People need

to shut up and just listen, to take it in and process what is being said. You can't listen if you are talking.”

And when you have the floor, you need to keep your message short and concise, continues Paquet. “If you talk more than two minutes, people will get impatient and it will feel like a lecture,” she says.

One of the most effective ways to communicate better is to become more self-aware, says Paquet. Pay attention to what you say and do. For example, if you know that you have a tendency to interrupt, do something about it, she says. “Too often people know they do this but don't make any changes.”

If you are unsure where you need to improve, Paquet suggests asking those around you where you need to improve.

“Ask others what you do that bugs them, and ask them to point it out when you do it. Do you interrupt? Roll your eyes? Text when you are supposed to be listening?”

And don't get defensive or argue with what they tell you, she adds. “This is a learning opportunity.”

Cultural differences can also wreak havoc with effective communication. When it comes to interacting with people of a culture different from their own, problems can arise because people unintentionally treat others the way they want to be treated, says Paquet. The problem is that different cultures have different norms regarding eye contact, shaking hands, or distance. “The offenders usually have no idea what they did, and the offended often don't speak up. This is where the conflict can start.”

Since it's impossible for everyone to know the norms for every culture, Paquet's advice is to do your own online research when a person of a different cultural background becomes involved in the farm. “Learning about that culture, knowing how not to offend and how to be considerate of differences... is a good investment,” says Paquet.

The newcomer can also teach farm employees and the family about their culture, she adds. “This is a great opportunity for communication and learning.”

Generational differences also have an impact on communication. In Paquet's experience, Baby Boomers still want to meet face-to-face to talk, Gen Y likes to use email, and Millennials want to text or message. This leads to asynchronous communication with

different expectations around response times, says Paquet. With email, there could be a delay of a few hours before there is a response but text demands a more immediate response.

The problem is that everyone thinks their way is best, says Paquet. The goal is to find ways of communicating that suit everyone, she says. This could involve using a combination of methods including daily or weekly meetings, but texting for the simpler things like, "Were you able to find that part when you were in town?"

Using the right type of communication for the situation is key. If an email stretches to more than 10 sentences, the conversation should be held face-to-face instead, says Paquet. When writing an email, avoid using all capital letters, says Paquet. "That will be interpreted as screaming." Also, avoid using red or bold fonts to highlight important instructions, since this can be seen as insulting by the recipient.

Without the tone of voice or body language to help convey the intended meaning of the message, the recipient makes their own assumptions. For example, "Have a nice day" could be taken as either genuine or sarcastic. Unfortunately, the recipient's interpretations are often incorrect, says Paquet.

Although email can be open to being interpreted incorrectly, Paquet says there is one circumstance where email can be useful. If two people cannot talk to each other without having the conversation escalate into name-calling, swearing or other inappropriate forms of communication, it can be better to communicate via email, says Paquet.

When composing an email, the writer is forced to think about what they want to say, and they are less likely to be rude or disrespectful, she says.

By paying more attention to what we say, and how we say it, and by actively listening, we can all feel better understood. **CG**

Resources

1. *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. This 1992 best-selling book by relationship counsellor John Gray is still a useful tool for understanding common gender differences, says Paquet.
2. Do an online search for "communication skills" and pick three things you can do differently, says Paquet. "Each situation is unique so pick the issues you want to work on," she says.
3. If your farm team is struggling with communication issues, there are business consultants or mediators who can provide training.

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