

Advocacy and Inquiry

By Jon C. Jenkins

Imaginal Training, Groningen, The Netherlands

<http://www.imaginal.nl/>

<http://www.iaf-methods.org>

Managers often express concern about the poor interaction, distrust and lack of teamwork in their departments. There is always the option of sending people away to do some communication training or team building, but in fact these (often costly) investments do not always carry over into the workplace. A manager concerned about learning can do a great deal in his or her regular coordination meetings to improve departmental communication.

All of us attend coordination meetings, sometimes several times a month. As a manager concerned about the knowledge, skills and attitude among your personnel, the regular coordination meeting might also become an opportunity for learning.

Learning can take place two ways during any meeting – first, in the quality of **advocacy** – how things are told and explained and second, in the quality of **inquiry** – how questions are raised and answered.

Learning to advocate

We all recognize low-quality advocacy: the report that consists of a few general headlines that leave the listener with more questions than answers about what happened, a project leader who uses such technical jargon about her work that no one knows for sure what the project is about, the focus on irrelevancies that obscure the key issue. There is a tendency in groups to tolerate these things as personal foibles of the speakers, and sit in quiet ignorance as no information gets across. For the manager, however, these practices are precisely the opportunities you can use to strengthen the communication skills of your team.

High quality advocacy takes place when a message is not only clear in itself, but the listener can also understand the relevance of the message to his or her own work. The listener understands what the message “means” to him or her. A quality message is always tailored to the audience to whom it is being delivered. Naturally we assume that a joke or story would be told differently if told to the boss or told to one’s children at home. But in fact the same is just as true for messages to all of the various stakeholders to whom we report – each one has unique expectations, concerns and interests, which need to be addressed specifically.

Get your team to improve its advocacy by trying any of the following approaches:

- ❖ Try out the rule that reports include not only what happened, but also what the implications are for the department or team.
- ❖ Try out a structure for team reporting, such as the key victory and the key challenge this week

or what we did in this project, what worked and didn’t work and what we will do next time.

- ❖ Ensure that you discuss not only victories but also blocks and how to manage them.
- ❖ Ask any presenter who does not include implications in his report, “What would you say this means for ... (the project as a whole / our work this week / this month’s turnover)?”

Learning to inquire

On the other hand, we all have experienced lazy inquiry: the meeting in which no one has any questions, and then participants mutter on the way out that they can’t understand what is going on; comments disguised as questions: “But can you give us some idea why on earth you visited ABC & Sons anyway?”; and questions that lead the group onto a tangent.

Your team can learn to improve its inquiry through any of the following approaches:

- ❖ When you have agreed a reporting structure and the reporter has not covered one of its parts, always ask about the missing part in the questioning period after the report.
- ❖ Distinguish between two phases of questions in every discussion: first, points of clarification (to make sure we are all talking about the same information) and only then shift to questions of analysis and intent. In other words, make sure everyone has understood what the speaker just said before going into more detailed analysis.
- ❖ If you have a team that does not question, you may have to push a bit. Allow time after every report or announcement for questions. Stimulate your colleagues to raise questions. A simple exercise is to start the meeting by asking each person to mention one question about their work they have been struggling with this week or this month. In customer service roles, this can become one interesting question a customer asked.
- ❖ Spend 5 minutes before a presentation by any outside speaker making a brainstorm together of things you want to know from this speaker. Then make sure those points are treated in the questioning round if they were not dealt with in the presentation.
- ❖ Reduce your tolerance of comments wrapped in questions – it only takes a few occasions of saying, “That sounds like a comment to me. Do you have a question?” or suchlike, for the team to shift its approach.

Improving the way your team reports and the way it asks questions in your own coordination meeting can go a long way to strengthening the team or department’s communication skills – and thereby improving its work effectiveness.