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"Spring training for communicators"

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Despite the fact that they're professionals, every February major league baseball players head south for spring training, where they practice the fundamentals so basic to the game. Even though most of them have been continuously performing these actions since they were five years old, it's a recognized fact that starting over at the beginning each year helps them retain and improve their skills.

Likewise, those of us in business have been communicating with others, both verbally and in writing, since we landed our first job. But, unlike ballplayers, few of us have ever gone back to square one and reviewed those basics. So, here's a crash course in the fundamentals that apply to all business communications.

1. It must be seen and/or heard.

It doesn't matter whether it's been placed in the wrong media or your audience is fast asleep. The bottom line is that if your message is not seen and/or heard, it's useless.

2. It must be directed to the correct audience.

Common sense tells us that presenting a sales pitch promoting widgets to people who don't use widgets is a non-productive activity. This may sound simplistic, but think about how often businesspeople spin their wheels addressing those who are not in a decision-making capacity. Granted, sometimes it's necessary to cut through layers of bureaucracy, but more often, it's a case of someone not having done their homework.

3. You must address the correct need.

If a company is in a survival mode because things are very tough in their industry, don't go in and pitch an employee assistance or employee benefit program. You're much more likely to be successful talking to them about a business development tool, geared to generate more sales, or some cost-cutting efficiencies to reduce expenses.

4. The message received must be the same as the message delivered.

Anyone who has kids knows that what you tell them, and how they receive, perceive and react to it, are likely to be two completely different things. Most of us in business have conversations daily where we could swear that, even though we read the same memo or heard the exact same dialogue, the person we're speaking with comes from another planet.

5. The communication must be delivered at the proper level and demeanor for the recipient.

Delivering the same message to a group of brain surgeons and to a gathering of construction workers requires a certain "tailoring." This is not necessarily as simple as it sounds. Don't talk or write "down," nor should you structure your communication at a level that is "above" that of the recipient. The key is to find the lowest common denominator.

6. All your communications should be factual.

This is not to say some of the promotional aspects of your business communications shouldn't

involve a degree of hype. The point is that people who are successful in business over the long term do not play fast and loose with the facts.

7. There is no substitute for professionalism in business communications.

Professionalism entails many things, including quality, reliability, dependability, integrity, and honesty. Those who demonstrate these qualities, no matter what business they're in, are invariably successful in their careers. And, conversely, doing everything else right and falling short here is the quickest way to undermine success.

Okay, now that you're loosened up, get out there and hit a few over the fence!

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