

CHAPTER THREE

Communication Skills at Work

“One reason I was successful as a Peace Corps volunteer is because they train everyone on how to act in the foreign culture. If I could have lessons on how to act in the U.S. it wouldn’t be so bad for me here.”

IT Specialist, age 47

I believe that problems with interpersonal communication account for 85% of the difficulties that those individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome face in the workplace. After all, neurotypicals are a socially oriented lot. Most correlate their satisfaction at work directly to the quality of their relationships with supervisors and co-workers. The “social stuff” even plays a role in who is hired and who is fired. Several times during my corporate career I was involved in decisions about layoffs. Usually, choices were made based on who got along better with other people.

Learning “good enough” communication skills is, in my opinion, the most important thing that you can do for your career. Too often, the communication problems of people with Asperger’s Syndrome are treated like attitude or behavior problems. This is not because NTs are insensitive or mean. It is because neurotypicals and Aspergians process information differently.

In contrast to the “we” orientation of neurotypicals, Aspergians have more of a “me” orientation. If you are a typical person with AS, you have a hard time identifying the desires, expectations, motives and needs of others, unless they are explicitly stated. You respond to situations based on your point of view, presuming that others understand and agree with it. As one of my clients explained, “I have little or no accurate sense for what would be appropriate to any other given person, or to any situation that involves anyone other than me.”

Neurotypicals base much of their interpersonal communication on their intuitive grasp of “The Big Picture.” They are quickly able to integrate information from their senses, memory and emotions to size up a situation and decide on a response. If a staff member makes a mistake, the NT manager will consider the severity of the error, context in which it occurred, and the work history of the individual before deciding what to do. Thus, a manager might decide to overlook a minor typo made by an employee with an excellent track record ... especially if the manager knows that the person was working under a tight deadline. Unlike NTs, Aspergians focus on details, piecing together discrete facts until the big picture emerges. This can be a laborious and time consuming process and the big picture may get lost along the way. A person with Asperger’s Syndrome considers a mistake to be a mistake and does not hesitate to point it out.

Emotions also play a role in neurotypical communications. An NT will anticipate how someone is or will feel about an event. This requires knowledge of some of the other person’s characteristics. For instance, if I know that recognition is important to Paula, I may decide to thank her publicly for her work on a special project; perhaps at the next department meeting. If I know that Steve is anxious about speaking in front of a group, I ask him to make a brief remark and work with him on his public speaking skills.

Scripts, as you probably already know, are of limited value in the “real world.” It is impossible to anticipate and draft responses for every interaction that could happen in single day (never mind over the course of one’s career!). Scripts can be of value for explaining unexpected behaviors, making requests and for initiating basic conversation. However, they are not sufficient for dealing with the complexity of human interaction in the workplace.

So what is “good enough” communication? I define it as the ability to interact with others in a manner that is perceived as professional and personable. Good enough communication means that you understand what is expected of you, know how to clarify anything that is not clear, and are able to work with others in a group. It does not require that you