

Airbus:

Communication and Empathy

Learning how to communicate from the deaf

Interview with **Bruno KAHNE**, senior consultant, Air Business Academy, France, December 2008.

In 2006, Bruno Kahne discovered the remarkably effective communication skills of deaf people; he realized the deaf got their message across more easily, more quickly and more clearly than hearing people. Consequently, he decided to solicit their help in teaching managers to better communicate. So far, 600 Airbus managers have studied with these atypical trainers — with surprising results!

BIOGRAPHY



Bruno KAHNE is a senior performance consultant at AirBusiness Academy. He heads a seven-person team of experts on leadership, project management, risk and quality issues. Prior to joining AirBusiness Academy in 1998, Kahne worked as an auditor, trainer and consultant for companies in the aeronautics, agro-business, nuclear, mass market and construction industries. He holds a degree in psychopedagogical sciences from the University of Mons (Belgium) and is currently completing his thesis in social psychology at the University of Exeter (England).

As far as Bruno Kahne is concerned, successful communication is always rooted in trust, sincerity, respect and humility. “A manager’s foremost responsibility is to create an environment of trust. To do so, he or she must display a relatively high level of emotional intelligence, plus a generous dose of humility. Because people on a team only open up when they feel respected by their manager and co-workers. Respecting others means seeking out, recognizing and emphasizing other people’s strengths. For managers, this also implies recognizing their own limits.”

Listening better to understand better

If you are not a good listener, communication is bound to fail. “The problem that we have to deal with at work (and at home) is that, at best, we have trouble hearing what

is being said (due to excessive interference: e-mail, cell phones, worries, etc.), and, at worst, that we only hear what we want to hear. As a result, we tend to automatically misinterpret what other people say. American business theorist Peter Drucker said, ‘The most important thing in communication is to hear what has not been said.’ If this is true, we still have a lot of work to do. As pressure to perform increases, so do misunderstandings, mistakes and conflict. How can you generate better, less costly products with faulty communication channels? Being able to communicate respectfully, simply, accurately and effectively has become one of the most valuable assets a person, team or company can possess!”

Learning how to listen from the deaf

How can you learn to hear what is not being said? According to Kahne, this is

where the deaf come in as perfect teachers. “A lot of companies have invested in training to improve communication within their teams, but the result is rarely as significant as the effort put in. Why? Because it takes three things to learn quickly and effectively:

- A model, meaning someone who is more skilful than you, to watch, then copy;
- A testing ground to try out the new behaviour;
- A safe and supportive environment.

Traditional training courses generally fulfil the second two conditions. However, they neglect to meet the first requirement — providing a genuine model — so they are practically doomed from the get-go.” When it comes to finding a model for effective communication, few people ...

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are more skilful than the deaf. "To overcome their handicap, deaf people hone ten fundamental communication skills far more extensively than hearing people. These ten things enable them to share information more quickly and far more accurately than we do."

Training unlike any other

While traditional training courses and literature present communication techniques, tools and even strategies, "the program with the deaf is rooted in beliefs and behaviours. Consequently, it has a profound impact on those who get involved. Consider the following testimony of an Airbus manager:

"The deaf trainers made me realize how poorly I was exploiting my capacity for communication. No one could remain indifferent to the emotions that emerged during the training. The experience made me want to move forward. I am grateful for this incredible lesson in humility."

The first step: manage yourself

"I firmly believe that managers cannot manage other people if they do not first

manage themselves. How can you understand other people's feelings if you are deaf to your own emotions? How can you listen to others if you are incapable of listening to your own internal voice? How can you trust others if you do not trust yourself?

Hence the importance of focusing on yourself before trying to work on other people. This means trying to understand what goes on in your own mind and asking questions like, What makes me happy or fearful? What are my strengths and weaknesses? Who are my models, and who haunts my memory? What beliefs and values was I raised with? Do they help me in my life, or have they become hindrances? Reconsidering the past does indeed make it possible to better understand the present. It is worth figuring out why you perceive things the way you do and why you react to difficult conversations in certain ways.

Effective communication is thus a two-part equation involving listening both to yourself and others. Paradoxically, it is the people who cannot hear who can teach us to truly listen. ■

Working with deaf people to improve communication

The one-day "Beyond Words" training course offered by AirBusiness Academy is led by a hearing consultant and three deaf trainers.

"The deaf trainers lead participants as they take part in games and simulations based on typical situations. Participants learn to copy behaviour associated with straightforward, precise and quick communication." Kahne begins all training sessions with the same exercise: three deaf trainers and three hearing volunteers are set up to compete against each other; the rest of participants watch for differences in how the members of each group behave. Kahne gives each team six pictures with parts of a story on each (each person gets two pictures). Without showing the others the pictures (the hearing people can confer vocally), each team has to put the pieces of the story together in the right order. Without fail, the deaf team finishes putting the pictures in order in less than two minutes, without making a single mistake. It takes the hearing people up to ten minutes to finish, and, what is more, their efforts are not necessarily flawless! "At the end of the game, participants are flabbergasted," says Kahne. "They realize that they do not truly listen to others because they are all busy speaking at once. They quickly realize that the ones with a communication handicap are not the ones you might think. Then, they are ready to learn!"

Key communication behaviours

Deaf people excel in the following behaviours, but everyone can learn from their example.

