

Why good communication habits can sometimes do harm!

Habits are useful. We do many things unconsciously – that simplifies everyday life, makes us more efficient, and relieves the brain's working memory, as I described in the article "Will is silver, habit is gold." If, however, we misread a situation, habits can lead us astray – in communication too.

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It was hard work: I struggled with Jacqueline (name changed) and tried to show her how she could convey her complex professional experience in a job interview through storytelling. Her statements were professionally phrased – she was a good communicator. Yet she remained abstract throughout. In short: I could see nothing.

Eventually, I told her *her* own professional story by first describing the company, then explaining her role, and finally making her activities tangible through concrete examples. She confirmed that my account captured her professional situation accurately.

Smoke screens in communication

She tried again – and translated my concrete depiction back into an abstract description. I was at my wits' end. Finally, I said to her: "It feels to me as if you're hiding and deliberately obscuring your experience."

No sooner had I said it than an idea struck me: some time earlier, Jacqueline had completed further training in crisis communication. I asked her whether she had learned there to avoid concrete facts and instead communicate non-committally – to speak in a way that says little without it being obvious. She said yes.

Scene change – different situation, same principle: Giovanni (name also changed) told me his success stories during a personal and

professional assessment. He was a gifted storyteller. Colourful and humorous, he described episodes from his professional life that were meant to demonstrate his exceptional abilities. I sat there as if in a cinema seat.

What is the goal of communication?

Yet something was missing. Because his stories were so entertaining, I didn't notice it at first. Eventually, I said to him: "Your stories are impressive – but somehow you don't appear in them. I only see you vaguely."

As soon as I said this, my exchange with Jacqueline came to mind, and I told him about her obscuring communication. Giovanni's eyes widened, he slapped his forehead with the flat of his hand and said: "F*** – exactly!"

He explained that he had been very successful in his previous role but was not allowed to make his successes too visible. His superior had perceived him as a competitor and made things difficult for him whenever he became too prominent. To be able to work in peace, he had communicatively withdrawn.

It can be appropriate to obscure things in crisis communication – or to step back temporarily to remain capable of action. But the goal in self-marketing is a different one: it is about being seen clearly and concretely. That is why you should always be aware, in communication, of what the goal is.

We cannot act unconsciously in every situation. Sometimes habit is only silver – and awareness is gold.

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