

Conquer Communication Litter

By Carol A. Dekkers, CMC, PMP, P.Eng.



Abstract: Communication is often a skill we take for granted. It is so much a part of our everyday life that we seldom take notice of the communication litter we toss out to the people we meet, yet we wonder why we feel ignored, misunderstood and even exhausted.

I Have never been much of a morning person, so I usually start my day off slowly by walking my dog around my neighborhood. As part of my routine, I take along an extra trash bag to pick up bits of litter discarded along the sidewalk – water bottles, cigarette packages, bits of plastic, etc.

When I started watching for litter a few months back, I was amazed that simply by becoming aware of it, I quickly filled a grocery sack. Now, even when I am out somewhere else, I notice litter even more.

After completing my walk this morning, it occurred to me that litter could be an analogy for what we encounter in our routine communication. We unconsciously contribute to communication litter by tossing careless words at our colleagues, and then wonder why we feel ignored, misunderstood and even exhausted.

Litter, litter, everywhere

Let me explain. Just as we need to be aware not to litter our streets with trash others must pick up, we need to become aware of the communication litter we unconsciously toss to those we encounter in the routine of our everyday lives. Unconsciously, and often in an attempt to connect with colleagues, we spew forth words and phrases without

thinking about how they accumulate and stick to those we meet. For example, we may toss out “Gosh, you look tired, must have been a rough night.” This sounds innocuous enough, but the recipient gets covered in bits of judgmental litter. All day long we make casual comments, unconscious of the fact that we it may be verbal rubbish attaching itself to others and littering our corporate landscape. We all walk around with bits of such lint that accumulates as a carpet of snow by days end.

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The problem with litter

The simple act of conscious observation is the first step to eliminating our habits of verbal littering. Without consciousness, we end up with so much communication refuse at the end of the day that we pass it out to our unwitting spouses, children, pets and friends. Is it any wonder there is so much road rage, frustration, and domestic discord? While we may not consciously treat someone with disregard, this is often the result when we are reckless with communication. According to Maya

Angelou, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

There are typically two ways of dealing with all this communication rubbish: 1. we can deny the problem and dismiss how it makes us feel, especially since we've learned to stay professional at work. In addition, it is often not easily fixable – by suggesting that someone "made us feel" could result in even more litter: we may be chided for being "too sensitive", mocked or even held up as an example; none of which would improve our morale.

Conscious awareness

However, the second way to deal with communication litter is 2. To become consciously aware. We can take steps to change our habit of tossing out litter to others, and recognize when it happens to us. We can be silent or redirect things to acknowledge something the other person is doing well. At the same time, we can pick off our own lint and discard it before it sticks to us.

A few examples may serve to make what I'm talking about crystal clear. Let's say you get up a few minutes late and run the danger of arriving late to work. As you pass your daughter's room, you notice that she is trying to find a clean shirt out of the pile on her floor and utter "You should have hung up your clothes and picked your outfit last night – hurry up, we're going to be late". You've just lobbed out your first two pieces of communication litter and started both your and her day with unpleasant, critical parental judgments. While you may be correct, it serves no useful purpose to comment on

something that should have been done when it cannot be now. In the words of Dr. Wayne Dyer, "... If you shoulda and coulda, you woulda done it."

Then when we walk into our workplace, we continue the habit. We may make everything about us: "I hate it when there's only one cup of coffee left, and I have to make it. It always happens to me when I'm in a hurry." The positive outcome to anyone within earshot is questionable. How much better it would be to simply keep the comment to ourselves and give ourselves a few extra minutes before a meeting in case the coffee is depleted, rather than centering the world on ourselves. This is another form of communication litter.

It is easy to toss out these bits unconsciously. When we are unstressed, we need to become conscious and aware of the words we use. Judgments about how we think someone's night was, or why their hair looks less than perfect, are best left unsaid. Once we realize that the momism "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all" applies equally to adults, we are on the road to reforming our littering ways.

Communicating without litter

Maybe now we can refine and reframe our earlier example. Conscious to the problem, we can consciously walk by our daughter's room and say "Good morning sweetie. I got up late this morning so we really need to hurry." Then later, in a loving conversation, we can address the mountain of clothing in the bedroom.

So does this mean that we say nothing at all when we walk by someone and make mental judgments? Quite the

contrary – once we notice and stop ourselves from tossing out a judgmental comment, we can replace it with a simple “good morning”, “good afternoon” or another comment useful to further the goals of the day.

Dekkers is the co-author of five books and over 60 published articles.

Summary

Just as my neighborhood becomes a little more beautiful by consciously picking up a bit of trash daily, our lives and our workplaces can also be enhanced by beginning to recognize the bits of communication trash we toss out, and also accumulate during the day. When we can identify our own contribution to the problem, we can begin to clean up the litter habit, and slowly but surely we can beautify our corporate landscape.

About Carol Dekkers, PMP, CMC, P.Eng., CFPS

Carol Dekkers is president of Quality Plus Technologies and works with clients who want to maximize their communication effectiveness. Her technical presentations on software measurement, scope management, quality, and communication have earned her a reputation as an international expert and she has served on the U.S. delegation to ISO standards since 1994. Ms. Dekkers ability to transform technical information into easily understood English has garnered her loyal supporters spanning more than 25 countries and a range of industries. Carol is the co-author of five books and over 60 published articles. She is available for keynote presentations, workshops, and executive consulting and can be booked at www.caroldekkers.com. Ms. Dekkers can be contacted by email at Dekkers@qualityplustech.com. Ms.

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