Introduction to the Practice of Re-Making Communication at Work

Part III of the book presents a practice guide to re-making communication at work. While several activities and processes will be introduced—all of which can be used to improve the quality and outcomes of communication at work—I try not to present things in a prescriptive formula or sequence of steps. This is because re-making communication at work focuses less on the finished product of what is made and more on the process or practice of making it.

In the three chapters that follow you will see a two-part progression in practice alternatives. It begins with a versatile range of single-step processes and then moves to the M-A-I-D sequence, which is a useful set of reminders for re-making individual patterns. To effectively set you up to begin using these practice tools immediately, the remainder of this introduction provides additional concepts and ways of thinking about re-making communication at work.

Learn to Live with Construction

Have you heard the urban myth about home remodels leading to frequent divorce? I have heard people say that the divorce rate among couples who take on major home improvement renovations is as high as 90 percent. Until all 50 states add a new box on divorce filing paperwork (something to check-off right beside “irreconcilably differences” called “failure to agree on tile or hardwood”), it is unlikely we will know. According to Ojai-based contractor Bill Gordon, the emotional toll remodeling can take on homeowners is significant. Gordon estimates that more than three-quarters of the couples he has worked with have had difficulties ranging from frequent arguing to
eventual divorce. His 20 years of experience in the field has undoubtedly taught him that it is hard for people to live with construction.

Re-making communication at work requires you to get comfortable with construction. I am obviously not talking about physical construction, but many of the same tolls that remodeling a home can take on people are relevant in our patterns of interaction with others. Frequent and unpleasant surprises, extra time and costs required to address unforeseen problems, differing expectations that are hard to work out, and the stress from being out of a comfortable routine are among the most common challenges of a construction project. Some words of wisdom that can assist people in their survival during construction include: pick your battles and stand your ground on things that matter; choose your moment to bring issues and concerns up with others; listen to all ideas and make it a collaborative process; take advice from the professionals; and laugh and try to enjoy the ride. The same can be said about the challenges and words of wisdom for re-making communication at work.

Avoid the Fix-It Mindset

In my early career I trained conflict resolution practitioners, many of whom were lawyers seeking a better way to practice law. Their intentions were often to get out of litigation and serve their clients in ways that left them feeling a bit more whole than the win-at-all-costs approach could do. Some of these attorneys were the sharpest people I knew, with analytical skills and reasoning abilities that were off the charts. Despite these strengths, the challenge for them was to understand the fundamental concept of interest-based negotiation and the goal of a neutral mediator practicing a facilitative approach (i.e., it is the parties’ job to ultimately find the solution, not the neutral mediator’s role).

In my trainings, rather than teaching from a mediator-as-judge model, I taught mediators to draw out their clients and develop workable solutions to conflicts that would be reflective of their truest challenges and durable after implementation. It was a hard concept for them to get, and many of them would not accept that they were not there to solve people’s problems and give advice. When the light bulb went off for my students I began referring to them as “reformed problem solvers.” They finally realized that the quick identification of the problem and the spoon-fed solution was not what their clients needed or wanted. A more flexible process that allowed people to unburden themselves from the effects of the conflict, talk through their frustrations, hopes, and needs, and then work collaboratively to author solutions that would meet the interests of both parties was more effective.

This fix-it mindset is tough to get rid of for all of us at times, particularly with the really dysfunctional patterns that we want to end as soon as possible. If we begin to see the pattern of communication for what it is, we often experience a few phases, beginning with: Eureka, I see a pattern I want to