Direct and indirect communication styles

Communication is fundamental to a happy and productive work environment. Companies of all shapes and sizes need to feel that there are strong lines of communication existing within the organisation, and employees should feel as if they are able to communicate with their peers and senior staff members in a positive way. In the same way, employers or managers should have the confidence and strength of approach to be able to communicate with their staff in a non-threatening and supportive manner.

Communication is also important in academic situations; whether this be at school, college or university. Using an appropriate style of communication can be hugely influential in the way that students learn, and thus subsequently in their overall academic performance. Similarly, by teaching students constructive ways to communicate and express themselves, their ability to go out into the working world and function maturely is enhanced.

The two most common forms of communication styles are Direct and Indirect. Knowing when and where to use either of these two styles can make a difference to all interactions with other people. Let’s take a look at each style in turn:

**Direct Communication:** “Is speech that significantly states and directs an action.”

**Indirect Communication:** “Is not typically authoritative. It invites contribution and makes the listener feel that their ideas are important.”

*Quotations by Williams, as found in the HSJ, 16th September 10*

**Direct Communication**

This form of communication is often used in the workplace to ensure that it is very clear who has the authority to give an instruction, and what that instruction is. Direct communication is used when there is no room for discussion or compromise, as the style doesn’t really allow for the listener to provide an opinion or viewpoint back to the speaker.

Direct communication can appear to some as argumentative or rude. However there are times when direct communication can be seen as the only appropriate form of communication in an academic environment or in the workplace. Examples of when this form of communication is appropriate include;

- When there is only one ‘right’ way of doing something; for example when there is a law or a procedure that dictates that things must happen in a certain way. Responding to a fire would be an example of this.

- When there is a fast deadline approaching and you require something to be completed instantly. Sourcing data to complete an urgent board report may be one example of this, responding to a cardiac arrest in a hospital may be another.
- When the listener has specifically said that they prefer a direct form of communication.

- When you are an expert on a particular subject, i.e. you are the teacher or lecturer on a specific academic subject and you can accurately state that something is true or factual.

Indirect Communication is sometimes seen as vague and non-committal, placing listeners in a situation where they have to ‘read between the lines’. However, an indirect communication style can be very useful because it helps teams work together in a more cohesive way, it can help create a respectful and friendly environment. Examples of when this form of communication is appropriate include:

- You want to learn from the person you are talking to as they are the ‘expert’ in a particular field. This could occur when an Operational Manager talks to a financial analyst for example.

- You need all involved to be committed to the task you are asking them to do; thus enabling them to all provide their ideas is crucial to forming a collaborative environment.

- You are looking to support someone else to learn through action and involvement.

Neither style of communication is right or wrong – it is knowing when to use either of the two styles that is important.