

REGENT UNIVERSITY

MEMO TO THE PRESIDENT
REGARDING COMMUNICATION TRAINING

SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES
LMOL665 ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY
FEBRUARY 13, 2005
JOSEPH C THOMAS

MEMORANDUM

TO: JAMES E HARDING, PRESIDENT
FROM: JOSEPH C THOMAS
SUBJECT: OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON TEAM COMMUNICATION
DATE: FEBRUARY 13, 2005

Jim, I've completed my ad hoc review of team meetings for several of the key leadership teams and project teams in which your staff participates. As we've discussed, these teams are working on several of the most critical initiatives for the company. This memo summarizes my findings and recommendations.

I observed a main theme that revolves around interpersonal and group communication processes. This theme represents the most significant opportunity to improve the effectiveness of team meetings as well as subsequent teamwork of the groups. Follow up conversations with many of the individuals involved confirmed my impressions and revealed that this theme is a general pattern experienced by many in team meetings across the organization.

The label I put on this theme is "contentious discussion." The word "discussion" as I use it here means to break down; it emphasizes the notion of analysis and promotion of different points of view. Normally, diverse points of view have value, but this value is limited when participants demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to go beyond their own perspective. Team meetings frequently break down into a gamesmanship mentality as participants disagree with each other and strive to win points for themselves without arriving at agreement (Bohm, 2003). This results in ineffectiveness and great frustration on the part of all involved.

Communication theory refers to this as "monologue" or "finalization." This occurs when the interaction between individuals becomes a dead end with no synthesis of positions or ideas. In contrast, the process of "dialogue" is when participants engage in enriching conversation

learning from each other, adding synergistic value, and ultimately arriving at consensus or a position from which the group can proceed (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). In dialogue, there is no attempt to make your viewpoint prevail; it is a win-win situation for all (Bohm, 2003).

The technology of dialogue involves several key concepts: suspension of judgment, identification and suspension of assumptions, listening, inquiry, and reflection (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). I have had successful experiences in organizations applying a particular seminar which I recommend bringing in-house for you and your staff to learn these important skills. The seminar is Forging Breakthroughs, based upon Peter Senge's best selling work *The Fifth Discipline* and taught by Peter Senge himself. Rather than repeat the details of this seminar here, go the Forging Breakthroughs website at <http://www.ninthhouse.com/solution/courses/fb/>.

It's critical that you take the lead and demonstrate enthusiasm by participating in the seminar as this sets the tone for your staff and teams. I'm confident that the experience of this seminar will lead to major positive change in how you and your staff work together to accomplish your mission, and that this experience will result in an initiative to roll out this training across the organization. I look forward to working with you to make this happen, and will schedule a meeting next week to discuss my observations and recommendations in more detail, and to firm up our plans.

Joseph

REFERENCES

Bohm, D. (2003). *On Dialogue*. New York: Routledge.

Ellinor, L, & Gerard, G. (1998). *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*. New York: Wiley & Sons

Littlejohn, S. & Foss, K.A. (2005). *Theories of Human Communication*. (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.