

Communication interpersonal

Tony Miosich

INTRODUCTION

Communication today is a wonderful thing, with mobile phones that fit into the palm of the hand, the Internet and satellites that beam images around the world. Yet with all this interaction and technology we still have difficulties in communicating our needs, our wants and our feelings, which often leads to conflict such as civil unrest and, at worst, wars between countries. This would indicate that technological advancement is not a guarantee for good communication. Education and the ability to express one's self is of paramount importance in effective communication.

If you gave a non-trades person the most up to date carpentry tools on the market and ask them to make a piece of furniture, they would probably not be able to turn the machinery on, let alone make anything. If someone with the skills were given the same equipment they would be able to create a work of art. Like the communicating tools we use, they are only as good as the person using them. Communication is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour.

FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Criticism is a form of communicating, but remember that criticism never built a house, wrote a play, composed a song, painted a picture or improved a marriage, 'money speaks all languages', but it can be said that it is not a good communicator as it tends to breed:

- greed;
- violence;
- disputes; and
- is a major cause of marriage break ups.

A major factor in your success in gaining employment is your communication skills. It is a fact of life that many people, when looking for work, are judged on skills they never actually use on the job on a day to day basis. For example:

- they get rejected for writing a poor letter of application when as part of their job they would never have to write a letter;
- they get rejected for their poor interview skills even though they would never experience anything like an interview on the job;
- they get rejected because of their telephone skills when they would not have to use the phone as part of their work.

The good news is that communication skills can be learned and, if mastering them means getting a job or getting a better job, it is worth the effort.

PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNICATION

The problem with communication is that many words and phrases we use are ambiguous and mean different things to different people. Depending on who you are talking to, if you asked someone to get some coke, they may get:

- a coca cola drink;
- a bag of coal (coke);
- some cocaine.

Pot in my day was something that you cooked with, being gay was being happy and being 'just wicked' was being nasty and evil.

Another problem is that certain words have emotional connotations. Take the word 'appointment'. You tend to make an appointment with doctors, dentists and lawyers and these are associated with pain, stress and problems. Therefore, don't ask potential employers for an appointment as the word makes most people feel uncomfortable.

BENEFITS OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

As a councillor good communication is vital in the day to day dealings with a wide range of people. From the CEO to the ratepayer wanting a new footpath, communication is crucial to the final outcome. Dealing with law enforcement officers as a councillor is no different.

I believe in the old adage that 'if you fail to plan, you plan to fail'. Just as I planned my election campaign so upon election to council I immediately began planning my education process of understanding the workings of local government.

I enrolled in the Municipal Law Enforcement 'A' Course at Perth College of TAFE, to gain an appreciation of the role of rangers in the community and some of the difficulties encountered by them. This experience has gone a long way to helping me understand how policy and local laws, that are decided at council, are followed through and the final implications they have for the community.

This has made me more effective in my role and has provided a good communication base between myself and the city's law enforcement officers. It has given me an understanding of the issues whilst being able to communicate the needs of the community and understand the difficulties faced in enforcing the laws.

We all know that communication is a two way street and that first you need to be able to listen, to understand and then speak to be understood. We all have two ears and one mouth and some say we need to use them in that proportion. Respect for each other is important especially when time for proper communication is limited because a judgement call is needed and we need to trust the decisions or opinions of others.

It is important to note that decisions and opinions of rangers are taken into account as part of the council decision making process. Rangers represent councils' front-line personnel, charged with the responsibility of applying a wide range of legislative and policy provisions which include animal management. The application of such diverse activities calls for many and varied specialist abilities, but none more important than interpersonal communication (written and oral) skills.

Local government is a service industry and all organisations of this type have to deal with dissatisfied clients at various times. Personnel directly involved in the enforcement of legislation clearly appreciate the potential for conflict and understand that with the correct professional approach those difficult situations can be managed. In most cases situations that involve rangers are interpersonal rather than inter-group in nature. Thus, today's rangers, more than ever before, realise the importance of interpersonal communication skills and are using these acquired skills to manage difficult situations.

While the benefits of good communications are well understood by organisations, sadly with some bureaucracies the information only flows from the top down. Progressive local governments appreciate the benefits of organisational communications that flow upwards. These local authorities can utilise information and feedback they receive, from personnel such as rangers, when considering legislative and policy matters. To highlight this point I will cite an example at the City of Fremantle where advice provided by rangers to council's executive enabled council to make a correct decision based on facts rather than perceptions.

Some time ago, council was requested to consider extending the approved dog exercise area over the winter months at the local beach.

It was assumed by the residents that the use of the beach over the winter months would be limited to a few fanatic joggers. However information communicated by council's rangers indicated that their monitoring of beach usage at odd hours of the day was not consistent with advice provided by the proponents. They found this section of the beach attracted many surfers taking advantage of the winter swells. A report submitted to council by the senior ranger recommended that council not approve extending the dog beach area. Clearly in this instance effective communication between elected members and rangers played a vital role in clarifying uncertainties before a final decision .

PITFALLS OF BAD COMMUNICATION

On the other side of the coin bad communication by council has resulted in a furore and a split in the community with the council trying to implement a credible waste minimisation program. The idea was to make residents more conscious of what they were discarding and therefore encourage better practices such as recycling, by picking up household rubbish fortnightly as opposed to weekly. The idea was not communicated well to the public who assumed this was just a ploy to reduce a council service.

The lack of communication in this instance caused a lot of disharmony and split the community who had opposing views on what they perceived were the intentions of council. A lot of time and money was spent on correcting this badly communicated message and this proved to be a lesson well learnt ó that all parties needed to be advised of all the details and that proper consultation was required before implementation of the program.

PRECINCTS AND COMMUNICATION

Today the greatest challenge of any organisation is one of effective communication both internally and externally. Local government has seen the necessity to implement better forms of communication and as a result of this has implemented the precinct system. This is a system whereby council provides administration and financial help to local groups who discuss local issues and make recommendations to council. Conversely council can inform residents of future proposals and decisions made by council. This has improved communication links between council and ratepayers and has given the opportunity for improved community participation on local issues

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Anthony (Tony) Miosich is a Councillor with the City of Fremantle and a recently commissioned Justice of the Peace. He has 15 years experience in the security industry and 11 years experience in the Australian Army Reserve Medical Corp, of which he is still a member. Tony has been active in the community, as past treasurer and current honary member of the Fremantle Ratepayers and Residents Association and has completed the Municipal Law Enforcement 'A' course as part of his interest in local government.

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