

When Technical Expertise Isn't Enough

BY SARAH MEUSBURGER



Engineering is a technical profession, there is no doubt about it. I would argue, however, that there is much more to being an effective engineer than demon-

strating the technical expertise associated with your discipline. Engineers work with people: clients, colleagues, leaders, members of the public, politicians, and others. In fact, the ability to work well with people can largely differentiate one engineer from the next. Success is achieved by the individuals who can demonstrate technical expertise, master the ability to communicate, develop meaningful work relationships.

To better understand how engineers can elevate these skills, I spoke to communications expert, Angela Lammers. Angela is one of the founders of Cetera Services, a communications firm based in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Cetera Services helps businesses plan, progress, and perform better. As a subject-matter expert, she shared four of the most impactful ways to communicate more effectively and to develop stronger relationships.

1. Making others feel valued

When you communicate with others, be thoughtful about saying the right things at the right time. Ensure you that put mental and physical energy into the way you listen to others. It is important that you adapt your communication based on the person or people you are interacting with. The way you explain something to another engineer, for example, is very different than how you would explain something to someone outside of the engineering profession. Each time you interact with someone, include the following elements within your communication:

- **Report talk:** Conversation to get something done;
- **Rapport talk:** Conversation to advance a relationship; and
- **Appreciation:** Expressing gratitude to another person.

2. Communicating effectively

Angela is a professional communicator. She never misses a beat in connecting with those around her. Her insight is inspiring and her enthusiasm is contagious. However, it is important to note that even those who are exceptional at communicating with others are intentional about those efforts. It doesn't happen on accident.

Anyone can improve their communication abilities, but it takes effort. Communication has a purpose. And communication always has an outcome. When you communicate with another person, it makes them feel respected or disrespected, valued or devalued, calm or concerned, supported or dismissed—no matter your intention. Identify the goals of your communication and focus on how to achieve them. Communication is a powerful tool to establish relationships and strengthen the relationships you already have.

3. Repairing relationships

It is easy to maintain relationships when everything is going well. When things go wrong, it becomes more challenging. It is imperative that communication is handled with care. In these situations, avoid minimizing the problem or placing blame elsewhere. Own any mistakes that were made and be intentional about communicating the following things:

- I'm committed to you and to making this right;
- Your feedback and concerns are important to me; and
- This is how we would like to proceed (and ensure that you link the solution to the person's immediate and future needs).

4. Maintain relationships

Within the engineering world, we work with clients, contractors, and members of the public on various types of projects. Projects have a start and an end, however, our relationships continue on. When a project concludes, like a switch, do you turn off that relationship? Angela describes the importance of treating relationships not as

a switch, but rather with a dial. Sometimes that dial is on high, and other times it is on low. Don't turn relationships off.

Over the next week, reflect on the way you communicate with those around you. Make the communication you have with others genuine and valuable. Remain flexible and willing to adapt. This is especially true today when people are working through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Demonstrate focus on the quality of each interaction you have.

Take the time to nurture the relationships you have with those around you. Be intentional and thoughtful about the quality of your interactions. As engineers, it isn't enough to have technical expertise but lack the ability to develop relationships. It's important that the engineering community embrace the opportunity to be better communicators. Bring your best self to work each day.

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