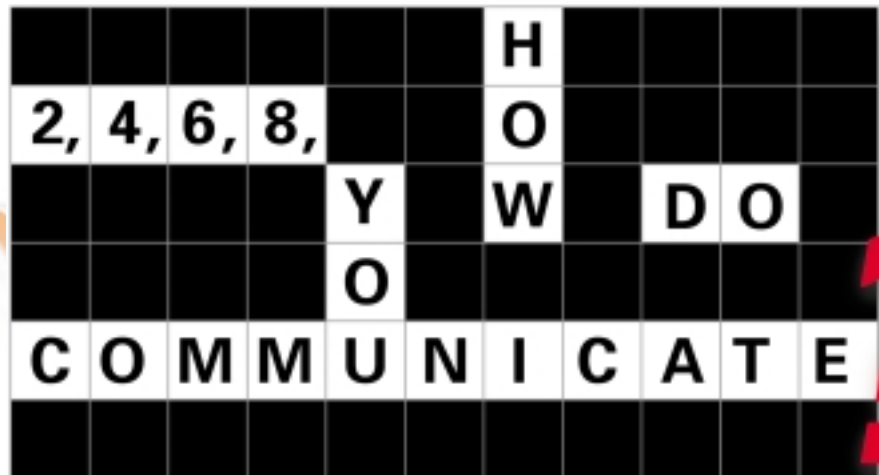




OBENG'S COLUMN



Recently, I've been spending a lot of my time teaching how to deliver successful innovation. I've been using lots of puzzles and quizzes and it's given me an idea for this month's column. I intend to set you a short test on how well you communicate.

Are you sitting comfortably? Then let's begin... with a couple of easy warm-up questions. (The answers are at the end of the article.)

Warm-up Question 1

Please work out what are the next two in these sequences:

- 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, ..., ...,
- 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, ..., ...,
- A, E, F, H, I, ..., ...,
- B, C, D, G, J, ..., ...,

Warm-up Question 2

Two people are travelling on a train, one person is incredibly bright, intelligent and brainy; the other is dim-witted, slow and stupid. They are sitting opposite each other and have a conversation lasting two hours and thirty-six minutes.

Who learns more?

How well do you communicate?

Now let's find out...

Question 1

Scenario:

You have just discovered that, as a result of the project you're running, 75% of the people in the department will lose their jobs. However, you need their help to deliver the project. Do you...

- A. Lie to everyone and hope you can bluff your way through it
- B. Tell them the bad news.
They're grown-ups; they should take it on the chin.
- C. Recognise that this is going to be as tough as 'getting turkeys to vote for Christmas'. Realise that the one thing you don't want to do is to surprise anyone, since this could lead to an emotional reaction which then makes it impossible for you to communicate logically. You will plan a four-stage process of: raising the issue, then providing the data and concrete examples, followed by trying to engage interest through questions. Finally you will allow them to help you build the solutions together. You know that using the technique IDQB™ is the only way to resolve a problem like this.

Question 2

Scenario:

The project appears to be going well. Most of your stakeholders seem to

be on board. There were a couple of people who seemed to understand what you were trying to achieve, but didn't agree with either the way you were going about it or the outcome. You have spent time listening to them and discovering their concerns, which you have now largely risk-managed out. However, you still have a small nagging doubt about some of the stakeholders, whether they are *really* with you – especially a couple of board members. You made a short presentation and asked them if they understood and you received a unanimous 'Yes'. But still ... do you:

- A. Not worry. Be happy and stay cool.
- B. Write a cover-your-anatomy email to them reminding them that they have said they understand what you are up to?
- C. Realise that having that intuitive little doubt is your saviour. Since these are senior people, if you've got your stakeholder management wrong, they could easily wreck everything you are doing. You realise that you have asked them if they understand and recognise the folly in that. After all, if they understand they'll say 'Yes' and if they don't understand how are they to know they don't, so they'll still say 'Yes'! You approach them again, but this time you ask 'implications questions' such as, 'Given the fact that we go live on Monday, how do you see this affecting your department?' or 'What do you think we will need to do differently as the project rolls out?' You recognise that with these 'implications questions' you are asking them to comment on the implications of what you have proposed, which of course they can't do unless they've really listened to you, understood your proposal and looked at it from their own point of view. So now all you have to do is listen to the answers they give to your 'implications questions' and you'll know if they've understood.

Question 3

Scenario:

The project members are from 10 countries: for most, English is not the first language. So far there has been a lot of re-work through people misunderstanding each other. The project is reaching a critical stage and you are worried that misunderstanding might lead to a crisis. Do you...

- A. Make sure that you speak to the team more loudly and slowly
- B. Send everyone on nine cultural awareness/language appreciation courses
- C. Insist that all communication is accompanied by pictures and diagrams to summarise what is being discussed. Get each team member to demand of the others they are talking to that they describe the next two steps they will be taking as a result of every conversation.

Question 4

Scenario:

You're fed up. You spend ages composing emails which you send and copy to all stakeholders and team members to keep them informed, but, time after time, they claim not to have received or seen them! You suspect that they are actually too lazy to have read them. This is starting to annoy you and get you down. Also, because they aren't reading your emails there are more errors made, sign-off is slower and the weekly meetings take twice as long as they should. Do you...

- A. Stop trying to communicate and keep them up to date. They're not worth it.
- B. Send your emails twice each time.
- C. Recognise that most people are a bit disorganised and many are unfocused or over-worked. You need to make sure that your communication answers the questions they (should) have in their minds. To achieve this you need to communicate at the right level and in the right way. You recognise that different stakeholders in the project have different interests. If you meet a stakeholder and they ask you, 'How's it going?' you need to give each one a different answer depending on their interest, eg, a senior/remote stakeholder is probably most interested in the big picture (Level 1). The sponsor or a stakeholder who has to help coordinate delivery is probably most interested in the issues faced (Level 2), and a team member or person intimately involved in delivery is probably interested in the full details (Level 3). Telling a Level 1 stakeholder the full details is just as ineffective as telling a level 3 stakeholder only the bigger picture!
So, you structure your emails with the title box (not saying 'Re:' and then the title of the email they sent you) but the big picture with any actions or conclusions you want the recipient to draw. The body of the text repeats the Level 1 message then it is followed by the Level 2 message and finally the Level 3 message. General actions follow the Level 1 message and detailed actions follow the Level 3

message. This way they only have to read as far as is relevant for them and also, if they don't even open your email, simply reading the title means that they get your message!

Look at this link and then send it to all your colleagues:

http://www.PentacleTheVBS.com/LearningBytesandEdVerts/Email_LearningByte.htm

The other question you ask yourself is: 'Is email is the right way to communicate?' You recognise that email works for simple messages without any emotional content or requirement. You know for example, that if you want to infect the team and stakeholders with your passion and commitment, face-to-face communication will probably be more effective. You know that to explain a complex, interactive issue a small meeting will work best.

Question 5

Which of these statements should you be heard saying?

- A. I'm going to talk to my stakeholders
- B. If you can't make the meeting I'll email you the Powerpoint slides from my presentation
- C. I need to listen to my stakeholders and discuss how we are going to achieve success

How to score

1 point for every A, 1 point for every B, and -10 points for every C.

You're not still stuck on that Old World 'minus is bad' trip are you?

Answers to the warming-up questions

Warm-up question 1

I'm not going to give you the actual answers but a hint – stop doing the arithmetic.

Warm-up Question 2

The one who listens more.

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