

Can We Talk?

GIVEN ALL THE TIME WE SPEND TALKING, you'd think we'd be pretty good at it by now. But we're not. In fact, we're often downright bad at it. The wrong words, the wrong tone, the wrong expression – out of such everyday miscues come many of the world's problems, both small and large. In the world of business, the results of miscommunication are especially plain – and painful – to see: organizational strife, managerial paralysis, missed chances.

Several articles in this issue of HBR take long, hard looks at talk and explore how smart executives – despite themselves – manage to abuse, misuse, or underutilize it. Take “Conquering a Culture of Indecision,” by Ram Charan, a consultant to organizations for a quarter century. Over the years, Charan has seen even the best companies paralyzed by the ways people talk – or don't talk – to one another. Some cultures, he observes, aren't candid about the commitments people have made but haven't fulfilled; or they tell people they're not team players if they dare to point out the hidden conflicts that undermine apparent consensus. But language is pliable, Charan notes, as are people. With the right leadership, talk can be transformed from noise to information, or better yet, from evasion to engagement.

The perils of talk also get close scrutiny in “Six Habits of Merely Effective Negotiators,” by Harvard Business School professor James Sebenius. The fine art of negotiation – bargaining, really – permeates every aspect of business today, which explains why so many executives have become masters of the medium. But when the stakes are high and time pressures intense (and when aren't they?), even the best negotiators can start babbling and blithering. Or put

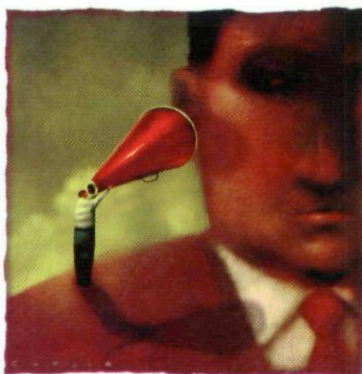
more elegantly, they start talking about the wrong problem. Sebenius's lively and informed treatise will set those conversations straight.

Two other articles in this issue offer a mouthful of advice on talk. “The Kinesthetic Speaker: Putting Action into Words” by veteran speech coach Nick Morgan is sure to add a new term to the business vernacular. Morgan says that the most effective communicators don't just stand there and talk.

They talk and, at the same time, carefully manipulate the space around them in order to adjust the level of intimacy with their audience. But that's only the beginning of making the kinesthetic connection – read the article for the full story.

Take a look, too, at the HBR case in this issue. It concerns every executive's worst nightmare: a PR crisis. Will dumb sound bites sink the company, or will smart dialogue save the day?

Speaking of smart dialogue, there was plenty of that around HBR's offices recently, as the editors met (and met and met) to create our first-ever list of the most provocative business ideas of the past year. The list, we admit, is opinionated and idiosyncratic, just like we are. And we make no apologies that it disdains flashy trends in favor of ideas with lasting impact – leadership, for one, and change management, for another. The list also reflects the wide range of knowledge and experience that our editors bring to their work. We think it's bound to start the kind of multifarious, spirited conversations that make talk worth listening to – and writing about.



Suzy Wetlauffer
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Editor

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