



Avoid common interpersonal communication traps

The challenge

In business as in private life, conversations often become unintentionally inflamed. A few everyday examples would be the manager who, delighted to offer an employee a plum assignment, is subsequently dismayed at the latter's demonstrated lack of enthusiasm; the senior manager whose proposal to the executive committee launches a discussion that leaves everyone dissatisfied; the project leader who witnesses a sterile confrontation among the members of his team, etc. Many obstacles undermine smooth interpersonal communication. Care must be taken to keep small conflicts from escalating and needlessly deteriorating the quality of interpersonal cooperation.

Watch out for four traps

	TRAPS	EXPLANATION	THOUGHTS	ASK YOURSELF
1	The self-protection instinct	When our observations are not sufficient to understand a situation completely, we tend to fill in the gaps with subjective interpretations. To prepare ourselves for the worst, we often unconsciously make the most pessimistic assumptions.	<i>"What is he or she not telling me?"</i>	• How much of my perception of a situation is based on objective fact and how much on subjective interpretation? • Could the same facts be interpreted differently? What if the intentions of the counterpart are actually positive? • Why not simply ask the counterpart to explain what he or she means?
2	The fear of upsetting the counterpart or creating a bad impression	In sensitive situations, we often prefer to say nothing rather than risk upsetting the counterpart or provoking an argument. By staying silent, however, we lose the opportunity to clarify these situations, and end up perpetuating misunderstandings.	<i>"What will he or she think of me if I say this or that?"</i>	• Is my fear of upsetting the counterpart really justified? • Is there a way to raise a sensitive subject that will not upset the counterpart? • Might the counterpart be glad that I raised the subject?
3	Confrontational thinking	When we disagree with someone, our first reflex is to go into "fight" mode. We then experience each concession we make as a failure. We end up seeing our counterpart as an adversary who must be defeated, forgetting, for example, that we are both aspiring to the same goal.	<i>"If I give in, he or she wins."</i>	• What do I really want out of this conversation? Are my goals really incompatible with those of the counterpart? • Did I really try to understand the counterpart's issues and constraints? • Does the counterpart have the information he or she needs to understand my own objectives and constraints?
4	The illusion of being well intentioned	When we disagree with a counterpart, we usually believe that our own intentions are good, while the counterpart's are bad. When we make this type of assumption, we tend to view hazy areas in the counterpart's message in a negative light.	<i>"He or she is really acting in bad faith!"</i>	• How might the counterpart interpret my intentions? What do they signify for him or her? • Could the counterpart's intentions be interpreted in a more positive light? How would he or she describe them? • Don't we both have an interest in ensuring that this discussion comes to a satisfactory conclusion?