

The Invaluable IT Partner

Using Effective Communication to Establish Your Value as a Business Partner

By Andrée Iffrig

In previous articles on communicating effectively, we've looked at how to ask questions to understand the real business need of your customers for IT services. This article examines an often-neglected aspect of communications: establishing your value as a business partner.

There are some obvious ways to establish your credibility as the IT professional serving customers in other parts of the organization. You could demonstrate how you have consistently resolved business challenges with smart IT solutions that were cost-effective, and hit the mark. Use business-like language to explain the results of your efforts, so that people can easily follow what you're saying.

Less obvious, but equally effective, are the questions you ask early on to build a relationship with the customer and establish your value. Your task with these questions is to understand what's important to the customer in terms of outcomes. Do not make assumptions based on what you think is important – ask the customer! The value you provide has to be from the customer's perspective, not yours. Here are some questions you could ask:

- What do you want to achieve with this project?
- What do you want to avoid?
- What does success look like to you?
- What's in it for you or your department if we meet your objectives?
- What would be the result if you decided to do nothing at all? (Doing nothing is always an option for the skeptical customer).
- What happens if we fail?

You want to create a link between what matters to the customer and what you can deliver by way of a value this customer will appreciate. The value you generate isn't just in the resolution of a problem, it's a question of how successful your customer becomes because you achieved a mutually agreed-upon result.

In addition to posing questions that verify the impact on the organization of any project you undertake, ask questions to get at outcome-based business objectives. These reflect where the customer will be when you've finished the project. Generic examples include:

- How would conditions ideally improve as a result of this project?
- How will your employees or customers be better served?
- What is the impact you seek on return on investment, in terms of sales, employee satisfaction, assets, etc.?
- What market share, profitability, or productivity improvement do you expect?

Finally, identify the metrics, or measures of success, with the customer. Ask: How will **we** measure progress and success? Put the ball in the customer's court. As author and management consultant Alan Weiss points out (www.summitconsulting.com), establishing measures of success is part of the way you create a conceptual agreement with the customer. These indicators of progress are an assurance you are on track with meeting the project's business objectives.

If you are conscientious with these questions, you will have no difficulty establishing your value. They're also a great way to weed out or set right customers who aren't very serious about working with you.

Andrée Iffrig is the author of ***Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace.***

Visit www.find-your-voice.ca to learn more.