

THANKSGIVING ADVICE FOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS



Many people dread Thanksgiving because the food isn't nearly good enough to compensate for the emotional drama that never lives up to its Norman Rockwellian ideals. But if you're considering ditching the turkey dinner, think twice. Thanksgiving is a great opportunity to hone communication skills that can benefit you in the workplace.

People who thrive as corporate leaders usually thrive at any meeting where diverse types are thrown together for vague reasons. Self-control, self-knowledge and genuine curiosity are among the essential success skills you can practice at the table. So if you are already a corporate leader or want to become one, be sure to RSVP that you'll be coming.

On the other hand, if you're one of the troublemakers at Thanksgiving (be honest), you're probably one of the troublemakers at work. In this case, learning to jump a few communication hurdles at Thanksgiving will make you a great steeplechaser at the office.

Scenario one: The claustrophobic table.

It's not that there aren't enough seats at the table. It's that there isn't enough space for all the emotional baggage. This is a gathering of your closest family members. You know which one will tell you you've ruined your life. You know which one will pick a fight with you about something long gone. You know who owes you money.

Recognize your own hot buttons. This will go a long way toward helping you stay in control. For example, your mom never fails to ask at family gatherings why you don't have kids. If you can remain composed when your mom picks on you (because who knows your hot spots better than your mom?), then you can handle it when the CFO asks why sales are down after he killed your marketing budget.

When your brother tells you he ate the last brownie, don't harken back to grade school, when you starved as the runt of the family. Recognize that your brother's selfishness isn't personal; he's just a pig. This lesson transfers to the workplace. For example, when your co-worker is late to your meeting for the millionth time, realize it isn't personal; your co-worker is just disorganized.

You can't talk over the CEO without getting fired, so somewhere, somehow, you have trained yourself to not interrupt people. Use that skill at the dinner table. Surprise your little sister by letting her finish a thought. She may be so touched that she says something nice about you.

Scenario two: Big table, big mouths.

This is a table full of fractured families interspersed with random friends who missed the trip home. Invariably, in this situation, you sit next to people you don't know or know slightly but have forgotten everything they told you about themselves.

The large-dinner-table scenario hones office skills. After all, if you can't schmooze over food and wine, how can you schmooze over a conference table and speakerphone? Use this opportunity to sit by someone you don't know. Practice your small-talk skills. If you aren't good at making small talk at work, you're going to have a hard time establishing rapport with the people you manage, to say nothing of your boss.

And remember that people will think you're more interesting if you ask them more about themselves than you mention about yourself. You might see this as a sad reflection on the human ego, but look on the bright side: We all have equal opportunity to appear interesting to others because we are limited not by our experience but by our own questions.

Of course, you can't just ask questions -- you have to appear interested in the answers. If the answer isn't interesting, you probably asked a bad question; everyone has something interesting to say. Even the uncle who makes a living selling salt and pepper shakers on eBay (not many people can appraise a salt shaker). Once you get through a conversation with him, talking to a chief information officer about disruptive technologies will be a breeze.

Another large-dinner skill that translates to work is your 30-second spiel about your life. How do you pitch yourself to someone new? Regardless of whether Uncle Norman or Carly Fiorina is asking, you are the same person. Be grateful when the fifth family member says, "So what have you been up to?" You need to practice on your family because you'll get only one chance with Carly.

One more thing about the turkey-day conversation: Don't ask the unemployed people at the table how their job hunt is going. Because here's the answer: It sucks. If you must talk jobs, don't make suggestions on how to get one. The unemployed person has tried everything. And even if he hasn't, he doesn't want to talk about it on Thanksgiving, in front of aunts and uncles who lived through the Depression and say things like, "Why can't you just be a tailor?"

Scenario three: The control freak.

You invite the people you want, you create the menu you want, you set the rules.

I did this. I invited my best friends and select family members and gave the latter strict guidelines. My mom, for example, had to agree not to give any advice the entire night. I told myself that the fact that I couldn't cook didn't matter. And in fact, it didn't. My garbage disposal broke and sprayed disposed items throughout my kitchen. I told myself this wasn't a problem because I could throw garbage in the garbage can, but then the sink started overflowing. And plumbers were nowhere to be found. (Thanksgiving is their busiest day. Who knew?)

"How about a dishrag? How about a toilet plunger?" My guests offered to help, but not mom. She sat on the sofa, hands in lap. But I know that hands in lap means, "I am absolutely dying to tell you what to do, and I am clenching my fists to stop myself."

So finally I said, "Mom, what should I do?"

She took over. She cleaned up the kitchen without flooding the sink more. She cooked the rest of the meal without using water. And she never said a word about bailing me out.

That's when I learned my most valuable Thanksgiving lesson yet: Set boundaries for the people you work with, but be humble enough to be flexible, because people will surprise you in ways that will elicit a level of thankfulness you didn't know you had.