THE INFLUENTIAL RISK PROFESSIONAL: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF LEARNABLE COMMUNICATION SKILLS ON RISK PROFESSIONALS' ABILITY TO INFLUENCE STAKEHOLDERS.

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How much influence do you have with your stakeholders? How many recommendations do you make in a year that are not acted upon or not included in company policy or business strategy? And what were the impacts of those recommendations not landing as well as they could have?

We have trained technical specialists in a vast range of sectors, from mining to retail, data analysis to infrastructure, and risk management. Despite having often intimidating technical knowledge and analysis of business issues, technical experts consistently struggle to influence stakeholders.

In this article, we will explore the often-overlooked importance of influencing in risk management, focusing particularly on the "learnable" communication skills needed to be able to influence as a risk professional.

In our consultancy, Bard Learning, we define influence as "the ability to sway opinion or decision within a network of individuals, by way of your communication skills within, either one-on-one or group interactions."

What we often see in our work with experts is an overreliance on written communication and technical detail to do the job of influencing. Of course, we must acknowledge it would be naive to downplay the role of data in influencing decisions. However, your skill in interpreting and communicating that data to a stakeholder is when your expertise should gear-shift from analysis to influence. You, the "influencing communicator," are the conduit between your data and the stakeholder who must make decisions based upon your data.

THE RISKS OF LOW INFLUENCE.

In order to diagnose this gap, our go-to questions are the same as those above: how many recommendations that you make in a year are not acted upon or included in company policy or business strategy? And what was the *impact* of those recommendations not being acted upon?

Frustrated risk managers report that this lack of influence leads to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and ultimately, ineffective risk management. We have heard enough stories to conclude that without influential communication and the buy-in from

stakeholders that it creates, risks can go unheeded or unmitigated, leading to potential financial losses and reputational damage.

A safety officer complains that despite constant reminders and compliance training, his stakeholders fail to change their behaviors.

Another risk manager is given feedback that her risk appetite statement is misaligned with the goals of the business.

An analyst in insurance sees stakeholders tune out during her crucially important presentation, and when she opens her talk up for questions, the room is silent.

THE SKILLS OF INFLUENTIAL COMMUNICATION.

To be able to influence as a technical risk professional, risk managers must develop a few specific communication skills and then deliberately apply them in selected situations over time. In this way, any technical expert can establish their insights as a foundation on which rich professional networks of relationships can be built.

These skills enable risk professionals to explore, understand, and adapt their communication to maximize their chances of cut-through and buy-in with stakeholders.

EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING: SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND.

Asking rather than telling can be challenging for us all. We have all experienced the pressure to do the talking. It can come from an inherited idea that experts are supposed to talk and lead the conversation, a need to ensure that all of our ideas are expressed in order as they occur to us, a need to uphold our credibility, a desire to control the flow of information, or to avoid silence. Whatever the reason, challenging this preference is always beneficial to our ability to influence and connect.

The safety officer mentioned above learns, with some effort, to transpose his statements into questions. This allows his stakeholders to think through the situations for themselves, and he is relieved to hear his statements finally coming from them instead of feeling the pressure to put his thoughts into their heads. The power of this cannot be understated.

At first glance, experts understand Effective Questioning to involve two distinct kinds of questions: Open Questions, those that begin with how, who, what, when, where, what if, (also 'tell me more'), and Closed Questions, those that begin with definite words like is, does, will, have, did, could, should, etc. They learn that Open questions provoke exploration on the part of the answerer and are excellent for gaining insight into stakeholders' true opinions, perspectives, objections, reservations, or agendas. And they learn that closed questions are particularly useful to confirm understanding and to control a conversation strategically in the way it begins and when it finishes.

But they soon learn that the real challenge in applying this skill is to shift their reason for speaking at all. They learn to manage their urge to express information (to tell), and they discover a new desire to gain understanding of the other person. You might say that we all think we are in control when we are doing the talking, but many technical professionals report feeling that the more they say, the less control they have. These professionals learn that they have far more control when they are the one asking the questions.

By asking effective questions, risk managers can gain a deeper understanding of the needs and concerns of stakeholders and tailor their communication to address them.

LISTENING: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER QUESTIONING.

It’s our strong contention that if you were only going to make one skill your obsession for your entire career, Listening would be your best and most powerful choice. Whenever we yield to that pressure to do the talking, we lose the opportunity to gain information that could aid us in our work with our stakeholders.

If influence is the ability to sway opinion or decision within a network of individuals, by way of your communication skills within, either one-on-one or group interactions, then the more knowledge and insight you have into those around you the better equipped you will be to achieve this.

Experts who take listening seriously learn to hold silence for the speaker, preserving their safety to elaborate further. They learn to paraphrase effectively without fear of being incorrect, and to reflect emotions when necessary to strengthen connections.

For instance, the risk manager above who had a misaligned risk appetite statement, by learning to resist the urge to fix and solve every point that her executive team makes as they make them, she allows herself to wait, hold silence and begins to receive more information than she had before. She learns a great deal more about the organization she works for, about the needs and goals of other departments and her insights are far more global in their perspective.

TELLING WELL: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE LISTENING IS DONE?

Of course, influential communication is not only all about asking and listening. Often, technical experts have to lead communications, and this is where many experts encounter challenges. Some receive feedback that they "talk too much," which is an unhelpful insight that overlooks the causes completely. Others leave listeners confused or without context, or leave themselves open to easy challenges by overstating their point with absolutist language.

Whatever the challenge, Telling Well can assist a Risk professional in maximizing the attention of a listener for their own ends.

The analyst in the insurance sector, who presents to tuned-out audiences with no questions asked of her when it's over, learns to speak succinctly by managing her urge to prove her credibility by including her every thought. This frees up her mind to select a level of detail that is more appropriate for her audience. She notices her audience's attention span growing, and the information she decided to omit from her presentation makes for great answers to the questions her audience inevitably asks.

She learns that her audience wants to do some thinking for themselves and, consequently, when she avoids using absolutist language her audience is more engaged because she is leaving them the space to judge the stakes and import of her data for themselves.

Telling Well enables risk managers to communicate complex technical concepts in a way that is engaging and digestible for non-technical stakeholders, and is a components of increasing the impact and cut through of your recommendations.

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS.

As is the case with many things to do with human learning, simply knowing *about* these skills is not enough to change behavior. Indeed, many of the most important communication skills are likely to be very familiar to anyone who has sat in a training session in the last 20 odd years.

But as we always say, "Familiarity does not equal mastery.”

Mastering these communication skills requires focused, deliberate practice. Role-playing or real-playing different scenarios that risk managers may encounter in their role can help to drill skills, develop the ability to think on their feet, and more effectively manage real-world conversations.

In a group forum, risk professionals can learn from each other, receive feedback from colleagues on the application of their communication skills, and use that feedback to identify areas for improvement and to practice.

DELIBERATE COMMUNICATION. THE PATH TO INFLUENCE.

The above skills must be deliberately applied in order to be developed successfully. These skills enable risk professionals to explore, understand their stakeholders, and adapt their communication to maximize their chances of buy-in.

With deliberate practice and application, risk professionals can increase their influence, impact, and ultimately, the efficacy of their work in the organizations they serve.