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Communications Focused LinkedIn Learnalong
October 19, 2023

Summary

National RTAP held its inaugural LinkedIn Learnalong on October 19, 2023. The Communications-Focused Learnalong was moderated by moderated by Marianna Hanefeld, Transportation Planner/RTAP Manager, Washington State DOT, Kevin Wassom, Compliance Analyst, Michigan DOT; and Jaimie Baldwin, Training and Transportation Specialist, Oregon.

The Learnalong concentrated on 3 short video segments that were part of larger LinkedIn courses: Dealing with Stressful Situations, Listen with Empathy, and Defining Boundaries for Conflict Engagement. Moderators led a discussion on the National RTAP LinkedIn page about applying these lessons to transit scenarios.

Participants included the following organizations, along with many other individuals that followed along:

- Disability Rights Maryland
- Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA)
- Michigan DOT
- Open Plains Transit
- Oregon DOT
- Steuben County, NY
- Washington DOT

There were over 400 impressions of the 4 National RTAP posts during the first 24 hours of the Learnalong.

Icebreaker Question: What is your favorite communication tip that you'd like to share?

Answers:

- Always walk into a conversation with a question not an assumption. (Jaimie Baldwin, Training and Transportation Specialist, Oregon)
- While listening to what someone is saying, also listen and watch for signs of what they are not saying. And then ask questions to encourage them to feel comfortable and safe in your

presence. (Julia Castillo, Executive Director at Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) in central Iowa)

- Stop texting and start calling, more personal outreach. (Cindy Frené, Principal-In-Charge, National RTAP)
- Lead with a smile. Works online or in person. (Marianna Hanefeld, Transportation Planner/RTAP Manager, Washington State DOT)
- Listen more than you speak. Be courteous and kind in interactions. (Angie Jones, Oregon DOT, Region 5 Transit Coordinator)
- Everyone's time is valuable, don't meet when an email will do, but do it with a smile! (Jonnie Kusek, Director of Transportation, Open Plains Transit)
- If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. (Cara Marcus, Knowledge and Resource Manager, National RTAP)
- When in doubt, keep your message concise. (Audrey Sellers, Advocate, Disability Rights Maryland)
- Be attentive and soak up information. (Eddie VanStine, Mobility Director for Steuben County, NY and NYSAMM board member)
- Concentrate more on listening than speaking. (Kevin Wassom, Compliance Analyst, Michigan DOT)

Conversations ensued from this segment about driving engagement and real connections, and whether virtual meetings work as well in terms of communication as in-person meetings (participants answered that sometimes people turn their videos/sound off and multitask rather than really communicate, and some meetings seem just an opportunity to socialize).

Video 1: Dealing with Stressful Situations

Questions and Answers:

- Do you think it would be beneficial to prepare ahead of time for a conversation that could be stressful or difficult? What behavior or reaction do you anticipate from the other party? Can you harness your emotional intelligence in advance and enter the conversation ready to employ these techniques rather than having to react on the spot?
    - I think it is so important to keep reminding yourself what the end goal of the conversation is and not allowing emotions to lead you down the wrong path. I know from personal experience, preparing in advance has really helped me push through stressful conversations with the intended resolution with far less hurt feelings or additional frustrations from either party.... Not always easy though. (Jaimie Baldwin)
    - This may be easier if you have a 1:1 meeting with someone, rather than a team meeting. It may be helpful to briefly write down how you think the conversation may go or talk about it beforehand with a neutral party like a family member. If you think of all scenarios (the other person will get angry, the other person will not say anything, etc.), you can better prepare. Suppose you are giving negative feedback to a driver. Try to put yourself in their shoes and think how you might react if you were the driver, and your manager was saying this to you. (Cara Marcus)
- BAM! Just like that, you find yourself in a stressful situation. There is tension in the air and you can feel yourself slipping from mildly frustrated to outright angry.....What is your

FIRST instinct? How has this reaction helped the situation? Has there been times this reaction prevented progressing through the situation?
    - Luckily, my first instinct is to be quiet while I'm processing what to say and do. Sometimes that leads to people asking me if I heard them. Then I just say, "Yes, I'm thinking of how to best respond." (Cara Marcus)
    - It's human nature to get your guard up and get defensive. Nobody wants to feel attacked. Learn that it's OK to take the initial hit and use it to employ these techniques to get the conversation back on track. (Kevin Wassom)
- Are you intentional about preparing for known stressful situations? I know I dislike walking into a meeting where I know the topic is controversial unless I've considered what the possibilities of people's responses might be. I try to prepare myself to exercise restraint in my emotional response.
    - It's good to have a few minutes or even seconds before the meeting to try to relax, take a few deep breaths, and anticipate a good outcome. That can set the stage for less stress for all. (Cara Marcus)

Additional Feedback on this Video/Topic:

- As a compliance specialist, I find that agencies don't always agree with an audit finding. In one difficult case, the agency manager became quite upset and demanded to see the regulations that were "supposedly" being violated. After explaining to him that the goal of the audit was not to produce findings, but to prevent them and maintain his eligibility for funding, he calmed down. We then went through the regulations and applied them to his current processes, and by the end of the conversation, he thanked me for explaining them to him in detail and educating him. (Kevin Wassom)
- Relying on experience from past stressful or difficult conversations will help in the future. I always ask myself will this stressful situation have an impact on my life or others in the next five minutes. I put myself in the other people's shoes knowing that there are circumstances leading up to this stressful/difficult conversation that I may not be aware of. In the end, be respectful, listen and offer sound advice to resolve the issue. (Ellen Kent, Grant Management & Compliance Unit, Supervisor, Michigan DOT)

Video 2: Listen with Empathy

Questions and Answers:

- What are the benefits of empathetic listening to you and your organization? Consider conversations with someone who is a frequent complainer or who chronically has issues with organizational policies or directives. Could it be they feel unheard and that they are being pacified rather than helped? Could empathetic listening resolve the problem and end the cycle?
    - Staff that embrace empathetic listening will improve communication for both internal and external stakeholders (staff and customers). Suppose someone feels that their manager is not being "fair" to them or giving them more work than another teammate. Maybe just listening to them and employing the techniques in this video will spark them to have an honest conversation with their manager rather than just continuing to complain to colleagues. (Cara Marcus)

- When you are listening, how are you processing what you hear? Do you take notes, internalize the conversation or some other? What do you practice in order to become a more active and empathetic listener?
    - You don't have to always talk. An empathetic look, nod, smile, etc., and perhaps a brief "Yes" is sometimes all that's needed. (Cara Marcus)
    - I encourage the person I'm having the conversation with to speak first with prompting questions such as "What do you think about this?" or "I'd really like to hear your opinion on this topic." (Kevin Wassom)

Additional Feedback on this Video/Topic

- Establishing trust and respect is essential to create an environment where all parties involved in a dispute can freely express their emotions. This not only helps in easing tensions but also encourages open communication, allowing relevant information to surface. By ensuring a safe space, we enable a collaborative problem-solving approach. Boosting the speaker's self-esteem and confidence is equally important. Conveying messages like "Your input is highly valuable" and "I genuinely appreciate your perspective without any judgment" can go a long way in establishing a cooperative atmosphere. This approach not only alleviates stress and tension but also fosters team spirit, builds trust, encourages openness, facilitates the sharing of ideas, and ultimately results in obtaining more accurate and valuable information from the speakers themselves. In addition, such an environment ensures a better understanding of the subject at hand. (Eddie VanStine)

Video 3: Defining Boundaries for Conflict Engagement

Questions and Answers:

- How do you keep conflict from becoming personal? What do you do when one party doesn't keep to the "rules" of "business only" conversation and takes constructive input as a personal assault?
    - I think every meeting should start out with the ground rule of being respectful of others and what they have to say, especially if you disagree with them. (Julia Castillo)
    - Sometimes a timeout is needed when it really goes off the rails. Suggesting that you revisit the topic later after you each take time consider what the real issue is and to collect your thoughts can go a long way towards mending the fences. (Kevin Wassom)
- The instructor here focuses on asking questions rather than passive listening or interrupting, which I think is a fantastic way to have a guided conversation rather than a reactive one.
    - "What do you think?" is always a great question to ask. Or go a step further, "How do you think we can approach this?" (Cara Marcus)
- Consider this: If an unanticipated conflict arises during a conversation, what are some methods that could be used to prevent it from getting contentious and escalated when it wasn't possible to define the boundaries ahead of the discussion?
    - Take a pause. This is my absolute go-to. Without that pause, my energetic passion for the subject may come across as opinionated and combative. (Jaimie Baldwin)
    - Ask to take a break so people can process and come back together at a time when tempers have calmed down. (Julia Castillo)

        - It would be good at that point to ask those involved to write down their specific issues and what they believe might be a solution. At this point, you could also do some rule making. (Marianna Hanefeld)
    - I liked the part of this training where it explained how to what are we hoping to succeed and setting a time limit on resolution, especially, if we don't reach a resolution by our time limit, what's next? That way it keeps the conversation focused on the goal and how to achieve it. (Cara Marcus)