The ENGINEERING CAREER COACH PODCAST
SESSION #49
Nine Tips to Become an Effective Communicator

Show notes at: engineeringcareercoach.com/effectivecommunication

Anthony's Upfront Intro: In this episode, I'm going to give you nine strategies and three books that will help you to become a more effective communicator. Let's do it!

Episode Intro: Welcome to ***The Engineering Career Coach Podcast***, where it's all about helping real engineers to overcome real challenges and get real results. And now for your host, who is on a mission to inspire as many engineers as possible, professional engineer and certified career coach, Anthony Fasano.

Welcome. This is the show for engineers who want to create extraordinary career and lives. I have a wonderful show for you today. We're going to talk about something that is absolutely critical whether you're an engineer or a technical professional, any kind and that is clear and effective communication. Engineers, engineering professionals, we work on teams. Right? We work with other consultants. We work with the clients. We work with people that are not technically savvy. So, if we can't communicate effectively, we are in a lot of trouble, and that's what we're going to focus on today.

This is actually the fourth part in the seven-part series that I'm calling the *Engineer Your Own Success* series here on the podcast in celebration of my recently rereleased book, *Engineer Your Own Success*. I put out an updated and expanded edition with IEEE-Wiley just this past December and I want to thank you tremendously because the support that I've gotten for this latest edition has been tremendous. And if you've purchased the book, I really do thank you because my publisher said we're doing very well. And I'm glad because it was a lot, a lot of work to take the old book and really improve it by what I think is leaps and bounds and the whole bunch of stuff on productivity up the whole resume and interview section, it's a whole part of the book.

Now, for those of you that are looking to get a new job or if you're a student, you can start with that part of the book. But then we've got everything from business development to networking, to communication, and everything you need in your career is wrapped up into the *Engineer Your Own Success* book. So, if you want to check it out, it is on amazon.com. And if you left a review, I appreciate it. We've gotten some great reviews so far.

The show notes for the show today will be at engineeringcareercoach.com/effectivecommunication, and I'll list the summary of the show. And also, in the Take Action Today segment at the end of this show, I'm going to, not only give you one real important communication tip that will help to improve the quality of your conversations, but also I'm going to give you three books that have been helpful for me with communication, so stick around for that.

One announcement I want to make is if you are in the Washington, D.C. area or you want to take a trip there, I'm putting on an event called *The Engineering Career Success Summit*. It's going to be April 30th, will be the kickoff evening and then May 1st and 2nd will be two days of learning sessions. It's the only event out there that's focused a 100% on helping engineers transform from technical professionals into well-rounded leaders. We're going to focus on communication. We're going to focus on networking. We're going to focus on leadership development in a lot of different ways. And we're also going to focus on lifestyle design, which is something that a lot of engineers don't think about. Many engineers put their head down at their cubicle or at their desk and they crank through project after project for years and not necessarily thinking about their own lives and how they can balance their lives a little bit better. So we're going to touch on that in the second day of the conference.

So please, check it out. It's at engineeringevent.com. It'll be an intimate setting. You have the opportunity to chat with a lot of the speakers including myself throughout the whole weekend and I even added a bonus session at lunch time entitled to What credentials should I get in my engineering career where I'm going to facilitate it and take questions specifically from the attendees on their specific challenges around what credentials to get or to what degree to get, what license or certification to get. So please, check it out @engineeringevent.com. Any questions, email me directly at afasano@engineeringcareercoach.com.

With that, let me give you a quote on communication, which will bring us right into the main segment of today's show where I'm going to give you nine tips to be an effective communicator. The quote goes as follows: "Communication - the human connection - is the key to personal and career success." That's a quote by Paul J. Meyer, and I absolutely love that quote. So I'll read it one more time to bring us in because I totally believe in this, "Communication - the human connection - is the key to personal and career success."

So now, I'm going to give you nine tips to become an effective communicator. This is right out of Chapter 6 of my book *Engineer Your Own Success*. This is kind of a summary out of it and I'm extracting some of the key points. I'm going to run right through this and if you have any questions, comments, thoughts on this, you can go to the show notes after you listened to this @engineeringcareercoach.com/effectivecommunication and leave your thoughts, leave your questions and I will answer them all. And also, if you want to leave a strategy that you used

successfully, please leave it there. And this is a community, the Engineering Career Coach community, so we can all help each other succeed.

And number one, understand what form of communication to use in today's world. This is a tricky one because you're running big projects. Probably many of them are global, so you're dealing with time zones. You're dealing with email, phone calls, text messages, web applications, project websites, so many different hats. As a project manager, as the engineer of record, it's your responsibility to run this project - for you, I'm sure - for many of you listening to this podcast.

So now, you have a new responsibility that maybe wasn't such a big issue years ago. But, now, you have to just know what form of communication to use. The last thing that you want to do is reach out to somebody out of project maybe on email or by text message when they don't use that as their preferred method of communication. And maybe they're only on email or maybe they're only texting. That could really impact your project in a very negative way and you don't want that to happen. So get real clear from the beginning of a project from the beginning of a relationship with a client, how you're going to best communicate with that person or the members of that team.

Number two, utilize a system or guidelines to communicate with your project team and client. How do you communicate with your project team if you're working on a big project? Do you just use email? Do you do it through meetings and follow-ups? Do you make phone calls to team members and client members? You need to establish some kind of a system, some kind of a communication workflow even if it's a chart or however you end up doing it. Because the last thing you want to do is call up one of your clients to tell them about an issue on a project and they tell you, "Well, I don't know why you're calling me. Someone in your office called me about this a week ago." Looks terrible on you, looks terrible on your company, on your team, on everyone. So, put some guidelines in place early on in a project.

And if you're not the project manager and if you're just working on the project, then talk to whoever is managing the project then ask them if they have a preferred method or system or set of guidelines that we're going to follow on the project.

So, for example, if you want to communicate something to the client, and you're a team member, are you at a liberty to email that client, and do you have to email someone else? Do you have to go through someone else? These are things you got to get clear at early on in the project.

Number three, communicate early and often especially with your clients and the end users of a project. I don't know how many times when I was doing design work. I would ask one of the members on my team, "Have you asked the client what he or she wants to see on this project?" The answer would be no even if they were two, three, four, five weeks into the design without even asking

the client. Yeah, I know you want to put a road there. I know you want to use a certain material, but does the client want to do that? You just spent four or five weeks designing. What if they say no?

Another example I always like to use, what if it's a public entity or a public park or something that you're designing that's going to be used by the public? Don't you think you should attend some of the meetings with the citizens and get some feedback before you actually go and design parts of a park that they're going to use? And as an engineer, you have to think that you're going to impact people with your design. So we need to understand what those people want before you actually do the design, and a lot of engineering professionals don't do that. So that's something you have to really think about and I really urge that you take action on that point.

Number four, be able to explain technical terms to lay people. This is a very, very important one and not very easy to do at all. And for me, in the world that I was in in the civil world in land development where they had to make a lot of presentations to town board members that didn't understand what I was talking about even if you're working in industrial engineering or factory, you still may have to explain something to someone another department that doesn't understand your exact processes. So what I recommend here is to use analogies and use examples. It's always the best way to go.

If you can use analogies and put it into someone to own terms, they're going to get a better feel for that. And sometimes what you can do with the clients is reference everything in terms of dollars because that's what they understand and that's what they know. Say I'm sorry, we could use that other design if you want to. It's going to cost you though an extra $200,000 because the technology in it. That's where they could start to grasp things a little bit better and they start to say, "Well, no, no. You're on the right track, and keep doing what you're doing." So make sure that you focus on using analogies and trying to break things down and you try to explain technical terms to non-technical people.

Number five, always be honest, period. If a client asks you for something or the supervisor asks you to do something, tell them exactly how long it's going to take. I see so many engineers get in trouble with this one. A client asks you to do something in two days and you know you can't but you tell him or her that you can because you don't want to upset them. And they're all happy in the moment but they're not happy into two or three days when they don't get what they want. Be honest. Be upfront with someone. I know sometimes it's scary and sometimes it's hard to do. But what you'll find is that if you can be honest with people, then you're going to increase or improve that relationship overall and increase the chances of success with that relationship in the long-term.

I tell the story all the time. When I had my first project, the client called me a couple of days in. He said, "Anthony, I need this plan in two days." First thought in my head was, "There ain't no way I'm getting that, too, in two days." But what I tell the client, "Absolutely. We'll have it done. No problem," and we didn't get it done, caused a huge problem. My boss got involved. My company looked

terrible. I looked really bad. And from that point on, I said, “This is how long it’s going to take and this is how much it’s going to cost. And I was sympathetic. I said, “Listen. I know this is important to you, I totally get that. But this process takes us two or three days. There’s no way to cut that back.” So be honest with people. I know especially if you’re a younger professional, it’s harder to do because you want to show people that you can handle things. But you need to make sure that you have the ample time as an engineer and professional to do the work that you need to do and it can’t be rushed.

Number six, pay attention to how you say things, not just what you say. A lot of engineering managers speak in a manner that’s very condescending to the people that work for them. I know this first hand. I had managers like this and it’s terrible. So if you’re managing in any way or you’re going to be managing someday, which I’m sure you are, if you’re not already, pay attention to how you actually say something to someone. If you want someone to stay later on a project, say, “Anthony, you’re doing a good job on this project. We have a deadline tomorrow. Would you mind staying here, it might be late. It might 10 - 11 o’clock tonight but would you mind staying and helping us get this thing done?” I’m going to say, “Yeah, I’d love to do it. I’d love to stay and help you at it. I’d love to feel like part of the team,” right?

But if you say, “Anthony, you got to stay here. I don’t care if it’s ‘til midnight tonight, but you got to stay here to get this project done because the client is going to becoming here and pick it up tomorrow morning.” Well, yeah, I’m probably going to stay and get it done, but I’m not going to be happy with you and our relationship is not going to be good long-term. So be courteous to people when you ask for things. I understand everything is urgent, but the way you come off to them is going to seriously, seriously impact your relationship with them and how they work for you and with you.

There’s a wonderful book on this topic called *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, and it’s one of those classic books you could read, maybe once a year or listen to it. I listen to it often. It really talks about communicating in a way with people where you take a courteous caring approach and you’ll be shocked at the results.

Number seven, listening intently. Nobody does this. Nobody listens intently anymore. Everyone’s on the go. They’re on their phone. They’re texting. They got their earphones in. You got to listen to people. You need to hear someone all the way through. When I coach engineering managers, I typically survey their staff. And you know what their staff always tells me? They tell me that they don’t listen to me all the way through. They cut my sentences off. They don’t want me to get all my words out. I know. I know. We like to solve problems. So as soon as we hear a problem, we’re jumping at it and we want to solve it. Solve it. Solve it, and we’re coming people off. Well try to sit tight and try to listen completely to someone and then give them good feedback. You’ll see a drastic improvement to the quality of your conversations and I’ll give you one tip on this in the Take Action Today segment in a few moments to really help you with this. I’ll give you an actionable activity that you can do.

Number eight, acknowledge people. Another way to improve your communication with someone is to acknowledge them. So what that means is, I learned this in coaching school, is that when someone says something to you, you acknowledge them by repeating some of those words back to them. So if a client says to you, “Anthony, we really need this project done next week, or else we’re going to be dead,” I might respond to them and say, “Listen, Tom. I know this is important to you and you really need this work done the next week, and as soon you as walk out of that office, I’m going to have ten of our engineers working on it and we’re going to get this done.” It’s better than just saying, “Yeah, Tom. I know, I know.” So you’re just not making that connection. So make it a point to acknowledge people.

And the ninth tip that I have for you, the ninth and final tip is to be responsive whether you have the answer or not. Being responsive is really, really, really important in the engineer world. In fact, many engineers tell me that this is what helped them to succeed. This is what really pushed them up the corporate ladder was the responsiveness. Because people are so deluged today with all kinds of different things coming at them from different angles and they can’t keep up.

So if you can, and if you could be responsive, you’re going to stand out. You don’t have to have the answer all the time. You do not have to have the answers. You can just say to someone, “Okay. I get the question. I know exactly what you need. Give me like 24 hours or give me a couple of days and I’ll get you that information.”

But what happens is, what people often do is they say, “Alright. Listen. My client just called and they left me a message. They need this information. It’s going to take me two days to get it. I’ll just call them back in two days when I have it.” No. Don’t just call them back in two days. Call them back right away and say, “Hey, Tom. How are you doing? I got your request. I just want to let you know it’s going to take us a little time to find it and maybe a day or two. But the second I have it, I’m going to call you and you can come and then pick everything up.” How long does that take? It takes one minute to do that, maybe two or three minutes. It means all the difference to the clients. Trust me.

They want to know that you’re acknowledging them and that they hear you and that you’re being responsive to them. And this can also be tied into ethical situations and design situations where someone might say to you in the field one day, “Hey, Anthony. We need to make a change. We need to make a design change. We need to increase the strength of this concrete or we need to use a different material over here.” And there you got a whole bunch of people standing around you with budgets and machinery on the line and they’re saying to you, “Anthony, can you give us to go ahead on this?” And the thing that you want to do is you want to say, “Yes, keep going.” Say, “You’re not that person that’s stopping the project, but that can be dangerous.” So it’s okay to say, “Listen. I know exactly what you need. I’m going to go back to the trailer and I’m going to call your office. We’re going to run some calculations. Give us a couple of hours and then I’ll get back to you.” You

know an intelligent answer so we make the right decision here, because if we don't, we could have a real big problem on our hands. It's super hard to do, a lot harder to do than I'm making it sound here in this podcast. I know that. Believe me. But the only way to make it easier is to just keep doing it. Keep doing it. Keep doing it. Keep doing it.

Let me recap the nine points that I have for you today on effective communication, then I'll close up with the *Take Action Today* segment of the show.

1. Understand what form of communication to use in every situation: texting, email. Understand what preference every client or every supervisor or every team member has.

2. Utilize some kind of system or guidelines to communicate with your project team. Understand how the communication is going to flow between everybody, especially between the team and the clients, the team members and the team project manager. It's critical to success.

3. Communicate early and often with clients and end users of your projects. To make sure, number one, that you're not doing too much going in the wrong direction for too long before you correct it, and also, to make sure that the product to the design that you put out is of the highest quality. And to me, quality design is one that's most usable to the people that are going to use it.

4. Be able to explain technical terms to lay people. And we talked about using analogies and examples to break things down. Some of the best engineers in the world can explain their technical processes to anyone that they talk to.

5. Always be honest. It's not worth it not to. It can give you a really bad reputation. And clients, supervisors, colleagues, they want people that are honest and people that they can trust.

6. Pay attention to the way you say things, not just what you're saying. Be courteous to people.

7. Listen intently. Listen. Digest the information. Do not cut people off.

8. Acknowledge people by repeating a couple of the words that they have said to you back to them. It'll strengthen the engagement of your conversations.

9. Be responsive whether you have the answer or not, it doesn't hurt and doesn't take a lot of time to get back to someone and just let them know that you're hearing them. You heard what they said and you're going to respond to it.

They're your nine tips on effective communication. Let's jump into the *Take Action Today* segment of the show and close this one out.

Take Action Today Segment

Anthony: First, I want to give you one actionable exercise that you can take and implement in your career today right now to improve the quality of your conversations and I give this one out all the time and still engineers struggle with that. I still struggle with it. And when you're in a conversation with someone, I want you to wait until there's absolute silence for one second until you speak. So if someone is talking to you, let them finish, listen for this, silence, and then speak. The first time you try to do this in a conversation, it will be nearly impossible to do. I promise you that because I've tried it. But over time, you'll start forcing yourself to listen better and you really hear someone fully and then you'll be able to engage with them in a much more complete way where they're going to feel like you're really hearing them and getting back with them. So give that a shot and let me know how you do. You can leave a comment at engineeringcareercoach.com/effectivecommunication.

And then I want to close up by giving you three books that have been very helpful for me on communication and I will link to these books in the show notes. The first book is called *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott. It's a phenomenal book in how to have those conversations that are very difficult to have. I read it in coaching school. I was blown away by it. I've read it a few times. I'll list links to all of these books in the show notes as well.

Another book that I had the honor of meeting the author is "*Make the Connection: Improve Your Communication at Work and at Home"* by Steve Adubato. I met him at a Local Chamber of Commerce event. The book is very practical and I enjoyed it.

And the third book that I'm reading right now that I'm really enjoying is called *"Stop Talking, Start Communicating: Play Dumb, Be Boring, Blow Things Off, Lose Your Friends and Other Counterintuitive Secrets to Success in Business and in Life*,*"* and that's by Geoffrey Tumlin. I was introduced to him actually by Bailey Harrington, who was recently a guest on the podcast and he's a member of the IECD, and I'm actually going to be interviewing Geoffrey soon hopefully in the next month or two to have him on the show.

Anthony's Closing Remarks:

So with that, I want to thank you all for listening. I hope you all take a look at engineeringevent.com and consider either coming to the *Engineering Career Success Summit* or we also have a virtual ticket where you can purchase and we're going to summarize all the learning session information and send it out about a month or so after the event. So please, check it out at engineeringevent.com.

And until the next episode, I hope that you continue to engineer your own success!

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You can also follow Anthony Fasano on Twitter @anthonyjfasano or Facebook at facebook.com/engineeryourownsuccess. Until the next time, thanks for listening!