

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Short Article

How to Talk to the IT "Guy or Gal": Pay Exquisite Attention to Detail

Most modern teachers have to talk to the IT Guy or Gal to get equipment repaired, to get software installed or configured, or to get network resources connected. But, the stress and frustration of translating real-world needs (yours) into the unreal language of the Techie (not yours) can be avoided.

How?

Learn to pay attention!

And, accept that the miscommunication that often ensues is "your fault." At least, you will be able to make corrections to what you say, while the Techie is unable to adapt. Sidebar It is possible that the Urban Myth of the IT Professional entering into the world of servers, networks and Desktop Operating Systems was to compensate for a lack of people skills.

Equally likely is the possibility that a teacher's Intrapersonal Intelligences are more than adequate to bridge the gap across any of these alleged "people skills" shortcomings.

But, these Teacher-IT contacts are too infrequent (you only wish that these folks were around more so the technology stuff stayed working) for teachers to figure out the code that makes sense of the Techie's mind set. The Hidden Little Secret The secret to communicating with a Techie is to get painfully specific.

That's all there is to it.

But, when you think that you are being specific, you are not. Period. End of Discussion!

But, you protest…

Here are some examples:

A teacher says that she "Can't log in to the computer."

This means nothing to the Techie. These are empty sounds without meaning. The Techie then proceeds to extract the missing information from the teacher's message before he or she can provide assistance.

What missing information? Log in to what computer

Using what user account

To what domain

With what "User's Rights"

Associated with what "Error Message" Another example: "I can't access my files."

Information missing from the statement…Where are the files? On a USB Drive

On the Desktop

On the Hard Drive

In a Home Directory

On a Burned CD / DVD

In some Online Storage Location

What error messages were noticed?

Are the files visible, or missing?

What application created the files?

Would the file just not open, or if the files opened, was the result "rubbish"

Were there any AntiVirus messages? (The files could have been infected and quarantined or deleted.)

Do you have backup files? (Of course not!)

Etc. Learn the Correct Vocabulary The Techie knows that names of those "network thingies" and that "on-screen listie doohickey," but you don't.

This is time for a vocabulary lesson.

That network "thingie" could be… A network drop

A wall jack

A patch cord

A CAT 5, CAT 5e or CAT 6 cable

A computer network card

A NIC (pronounced "nick")

Trick question: Which of the above pairs refer to the same thing?

Answer:

A "patch cord" is the same thing as a CAT 5, CAT 5e or CAT 6 cable, although those numbers refer to different standard cable types.

A computer "network card" is a "NIC," or, Network Interface Card.

Here is what these items refer to:

The network drop is the part of the network that you see, or don't see. The drop comes from the ceiling or from overhead and drops down the wall in a visible "raceway" that protects it, or it comes down from the overhead through the hollow part of a wall.

The "Wall Jack" is what you plug the network patch cord (whatever it's category) into on the wall.

The NIC is what you plug the cable into on the computer. And when you plug that cable into the back of the computer, most often you should see light. This is a "link light."

A drop is "hot" if it works (generally turns on a light on the computer's network card on the back of the computer. (A "hot drop" is not warm to the touch.)

Once you know that terminology, you can talk to the Techie without frustration.

And listen carefully because the Techie will use the correct terminology, and will be specific. Accept Responsibility for the Broken Communication Every issues affecting the miscommunication with the IT Guy or Gal is your responsibility. Accept it.

Why?

Because you are the communications professional, and because you are the person that needs help to get back to work…or, to get your students' learning tools back in operation.

You also want to speed that help on its way. This means describing the "issues" as precisely as you possibly can. Make the effort. Poorly Communicated Service Requests equal Resolution Delays If the Work Order or Service Request contains errors, resolution can be delayed.

Examples: Technical support staff with the wrong specialties are sent to resolve the issue

Some issues can be resolved remotely, i.e., from the IT Office, and waiting for the Techie to arrive tomorrow is unnecessary

Some issues will take a long time to resolve, and you might need the Techie to bring a "Loaner" piece of equipment when they come

You are embarrassed because you caused the problem, but don't want to admit what you did

Some issues involve the loss of data, and you failed to back up that data. This requires time-consuming and expensive methods to attempt to retrieve files from the hard drive of a broken computers

Whatever the issue, copy the exact words of any error messages. This is important. How to Support the Technical Support Process Without Becoming a Techie Careful observation, patience, and recording everything pertaining to the service request are tasks that will speed up the resolution of technical issues.

And explain to the Techie that you don't know the technical terms, but want to learn them so that you can streamline the Service Request/ Work Order process in the future.

Admit that understanding the technical vocabulary is difficult for you, and ask the Techie to describe his or her thinking process as he or she goes about the troubleshooting and repair tasks.

And be grateful, thankful and express your appreciation. Express empathy for the "almost thankless position" that Techies face, hour-by-hour as frustrated users and folks that don't understand the stresses of IT Service unload irritation, rage, indignation or venom upon IT Staff…folks that are just doing the best job that they can. Sidebar Want to vent your frustration?

Focus your consternation, anger, indignation and resentment toward the Superintendent and Business Managers that squeeze budgets until the numbers "oink" and order the IT Department to "make do" with half the number of technical support staff that are necessary to provide the stellar support service that everyone deserves. In short, express the kind of support and understanding that leaves a positive memory and a positive feeling about you in the mind of the Techie. (Save the tirade for the Superintendent and Business Office folks that deserve it.) Make a friend. Be glad to see your IT Friend the next time, and your friend will be glad to provide whatever special service that is possible. Summary Empathy, kindness and a willingness to learn go a long way in communicating with IT staff members.

And specific, precise observations go a long way in assisting the IT helper to help you in an efficient manner.

And by the way, the same skills that are needed to communicate with the IT folks are the ones needed to communicate with your students.

Communicate with Techies with the same level of empathy, kindness and willingness to learn that you use to communicate with your students.

Teachers are people persons, and IT Staff are people. Accepting responsibility for the success of the communication and communicating your respect for each person are traits that define a Master Teacher.

The IT Guy or Gal can be your friend if you behave in a friendly and helpful manner. The choice for how smoothly and sweetly the Service Request/ Work Order proceeds is 80% to 90% yours.