Convey trust with voice, professor urges

Cornell University

So many insecurities, so little trust. In today's stressed workplace, pitch and volume of conversations matter, according to new research.

"If you trust more, you use more emphasis, which is a combination of loudness and pitch," said Michele Williams, assistant professor in the ILR School's Department of Organizational Behavior.

"A range of volume and pitch is important -- it helps the listeners by saying, 'This is important.' If you're really interested, it's very hard to speak at the same level," Williams said.

Williams and colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology used observation and voice recordings -- sorted by computer algorithms measuring pitch and volume -- to follow information transfers among 29 nurses in the break room of a 30-bed surgical unit in a New England hospital.

Trust communicated through emphasis helps drive accuracy -- an important implication for hospitals, where communication breakdowns are considered the cause of most preventable errors, said Williams and MIT researchers Benjamin Waber, John Carroll and Alex Pentland.

"Once people try to understand each other, they start to communicate more clearly," Williams said.

The findings, detailed in a paper titled "A Voice Is Worth a Thousand Words: The Implications of the Micro-coding of Social Signals in Speech for Trust Research," will be published next year by Edward Elgar Publishing in a book on researching trust.

Williams was an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University when she first became intrigued by trust. Working in the campus hospital, she was alarmed by the conflicts among doctors, nurses and therapists. She went on to build much of her career as a social scientist around the issue of workplace trust.

"Few people think about the information carried in their voices," Williams said.

When not under stress, practice communicating trust with your voice, she advises. Then, you'll be ready to communicate trust when you need it most in the workplace -- when competing insecurities collide.

"It is much harder to repair trust than to build and maintain it," Williams said.

Workplace hyper-vigilance -- such as copying numerous people on an e-mail, monitoring the tasks of others and second-guessing -- sap mental energy, she said.

Williams advises that a more constructive way to build trust with co-workers could be by paying attention to the way you talk.

Mary Catt is a staff writer in the ILR School.

SOURCE [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *10/20/2014 - 1:25am*):
http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2010/12/convey-trust-voice-professor-urges?qt-recent_content=0

Links:
[1] http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/Dec10/ILRTrust.html