

Messages of BC3 president, instructor resonate with 150

Invitation to speak in capital “speaks volumes” about college’s successes

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(Harrisburg, PA) Strategies in communicating effectively with college students and with senior citizens could be “worlds and worlds apart,” keynote speaker Dr. Nick Neupauer, president of Butler County Community College, told a crowd of 150 at the 2017 fall conference of a statewide nonprofit trade association of public transportation providers.

“Tailored communication was important for that audience to hear,” Neupauer said of his “Leadership and Generational Differences” address to members of the Pennsylvania Public Transportation Association, whose goal, according to its website, is to provide “leadership, resources, support and technical assistance” and act as a “unified voice serving to advocate and strengthen the role of public transportation in improving the quality of life for all Pennsylvania citizens.”

In addition to his keynote speech, Neupauer also led a breakout discussion, as did BC3 instructor Dr. Anita Orozco, who teaches human resources courses for BC3’s Workforce Development. Neupauer provided expertise on board relations, and Orozco, on succession planning.

“I could see a lot of light bulbs going off,” Neupauer said of the effect of his presentations.

For Orozco, “I saw (attendees) taking cellphone pictures of the (PowerPoint) slides that I put up, which is funny because I normally don’t put a lot of information on them. Generally the slides have a picture or a graphic. It is not so much head-nodding that I notice anymore. It is the cellphone pictures.”

BC3 president: 5 generations, 5 strategies

In addition to succession planning, it is equally beneficial for an organization to understand “that this is a unique period when you have so many different generations in the workplace,” Neupauer said, adding that it is imperative to understand how to communicate effectively with those audiences.

“Think about how you would market a bus service to a college student – and there are certainly colleges within PPTA’s service area – and how would you communicate and market to senior citizens,” he told the audience. “Those could be worlds and worlds apart.”

While stressing that inter- and intra-generational characteristics often vary and overlap, Neupauer encouraged the conference crowd to consider defining differences and to understand what communication techniques work best for each generation.

Millennials, those born between 1982 and 2001, “sometimes want to be more involved, and seek more back-and-forth communication, more two-way communication,” Neupauer said. Those among the silent generation (1915 to 1945) or baby boomers (1946 to 1964) are accustomed to “more top-down and possibly one-way communication,” he said.

Neupauer chose his message to introduce public transportation service staff members to differing approaches intended to communicate effectively with riders and workers of various ages.

“General differences,” Neupauer said, “are becoming increasingly significant in the workplace, and the key is understanding the way in which you get your message out, both internally and externally. So much of that correlates to the generation you are dealing with.”

Expected rewards for job performances vary

Following the silent generation, baby boomers, Generation X (1965 to 1981) and millennials are the centennials, born in 2002 or afterward, Neupauer said.

The silent generation, he told those at the conference, is defined by the Depression and World War II, and includes those whose employment pattern was to punch a clock and work for only one company in their lifetime. They prefer to communicate face-to-face and one-on-one and are bound by their word, Neupauer said.

“Their reward,” he said, “was hearing that theirs was a job well done.”

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Cold War and civil rights define the era in which baby boomers were born, Neupauer said, adding that those in this generation “are known to be workaholics who believe their efforts will harvest success. They embrace a team-based approach and are known to enjoy meetings.”

Their reward, he said, “is not in hearing about a job well done, but in the accumulation of finances or titles.”

Generation X, defined by the Vietnam War, Watergate and the impeachment of President Richard M. Nixon, works 24-7 and is composed of independent thinkers, Neupauer told the audience.

“They communicate directly, ask for feedback and invest in their own development,” he said. “Their loyalty to their company is to give a two-week notice. They are known for being self-reliant and having clear goals, and their reward is a work-life balance.”

The advent of the internet and the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks define the era in which were born the millennials, those “bathed in bits,” Neupauer said.

“While very engaging and participatory with others, millennials are said to be concerned with the end of the workday, prefer to communicate via text-messaging and social media, and seek constant feedback,” Neupauer said.

Their reward, he said, is “meaningful work.”

Messaging advice for conference crowd

A tip for interacting with the silent generation, Neupauer told the audience, is not to expect the sharing of feelings.

“Focus on words rather than on body language, communicate face-to-face or in written form, and be cognizant of their time,” he said.

Baby boomers prefer an open, direct style of communication, Neupauer said, adding that body language is important during discussions and that the generation expects questions to be answered thoroughly and options presented to allow for flexibility.

Generation X may prefer email as a primary source of communication, Neupauer said. His tip to audience members was to consider addressing Generation Xers in “short sound bites to keep attention, provide regular feedback, keep them in the loop and use an informal communication style.”

Millennials respond best to action verbs and challenges, Neupauer said, as well as to text-messaging and emails.

“Seek their feedback and offer regular feedback,” he said. “Create a fun learning environment and utilize, embrace and understand their strengths.”

BC3 instructor: Preparation can help prevent crises

Succession planning within many organizations has the least amount of focus and the highest need for attention, Orozco said.

“Out of 20 or 25 different categories that fall under traditional human resources competencies, succession planning ranks lowest,” said Orozco, whose breakout discussion was attended by a diverse group ranging from maintenance personnel to managers and from a variety of different organizations.

“It wasn’t just a human resources presentation,” Orozco said, “which was good.”

Retirements and unexpected departures can expose an organization's lack of foresight, Orozco said.

"A lot of times you get so focused on the here-and-now and you hope that people are going to stay," she said. "You are so busy in getting things done and making things happen that you fail to plan for the future."

Proactive organizations that incorporate succession planning into their long-term vision capitalize on opportunities to develop in-house talent, Orozco said.

Reactive organizations do not, Orozco said.

"You are just trying to get out from under the here-and-now," she said, "and you lose sight of what you could be building up in the future."

Succession planning is not limited to preparing for the departure of those in leadership roles, she said.

"You have to look at those positions that are most valuable to the organization," Orozco said. "If those positions were to leave, would you still be able to function? It is not always at the top level. It could be an hourly worker."

Create, focus on nine-box grid

Orozco's visual aids – those that were the focus of those cellphone pictures – included a nine-box grid that serves as a method to analyze personnel and "see where maybe you have gaps or where you might have issues in your succession planning going forward," she said.

Such nine-box grids assess potential as low, moderate or high on a Y axis, and performance in the same legend on the X axis.

"You look at the employee as a whole," Orozco said. "And you plot them on a nine-box grid and based on where they fall in that, you know whether it is someone you want to develop for other roles, either within their department or outside of their department."

The lowest assessment is termed a "talent risk," describing one who is a low performer with low potential. The highest, a "consistent star," is one who is a high performer with high potential. Understanding the potential and performance of one's workforce can help an organization avert a crisis that may accompany an unexpected departure, Orozco said.

"If you are ill-prepared for it, then you are going to be dealing with the situation in a reactive mode, and when one person leaves, it doesn't just affect that one person or that one area," she said. "There is a trickle-down effect that ends up occurring."

BC3 experts “front and center in Harrisburg”

Neupauer advised audience members to understand what communication methods work best for each generation, an approach that mirrors his at BC3, he said.

“We do this very well at the college,” Neupauer said. “We analyze our publics, who they are and we tailor our messages accordingly. When it comes to millennials, I will blog. We have Twitter. We have Facebook. We have Instagram. My emails will be tighter, shorter. And if we are communicating with different generations, that could warrant face-to-face meetings, multiple meetings or, at a minimum, phone calls.”

His keynote speech was well-received, he said.

“These are often organizations that are very flat, not very deep,” Neupauer said. “They don’t have large departments. And I have always argued the need to have appropriate depth in your communication departments.”

His and Orozco’s invitation to address the PPTA’s 2017 fall conference “was a great opportunity for BC3,” Neupauer said.

“Here we were, in the center of the state, representing the excellence of Butler County Community College,” Neupauer said. “We were front and center in Harrisburg. It has everything to do with BC3. That speaks volumes to our successes.”