When I review my 40+ years in the coatings industry, including recent consulting assignments, I realize that I have seen a great many problems that were caused or made worse by poor communication, miscommunication in the form of misleading information or—in some cases—no communication at all. In this day of instant messaging via telephone and e-mail, the last one may seem difficult to believe, but it is not unusual.

Often, poor communication is due to bad attitudes or a lack of people skills of individuals or even entire organizations. I once received a call from an engineer from a paint plant owned by an auto company. He was asking good questions that could easily have been answered by the R&D people at the parent company. When I said this, the person replied, “I would die first before asking them.” Wow! I do not know who turned him off, but somebody did.

I recall visiting one division of a large auto company and having a manager ask me what the other divisions were doing with regard to paint. He appeared to be unwilling to pick up the phone and ask his counterparts in those divisions. I later found out from colleagues that it was common for suppliers to provide the various parts of this company with information about the other divisions. That is a form of communication, but not a very efficient one!

I am not a lover of telephones (including cell phones) and was quite happy when I was a teacher in West Africa years ago and had no telephone in my house. For sharing information, I prefer e-mails, but for business they can cause as many problems as they solve. E-mails often come across as preaching or rude and the opportunity for the sender to teach or help may be lost. Rudeness is a great way to destroy communication and, in many cases, creativity. I recall being in meetings when one or another young person asked a question or made a comment only to have a senior manager say, “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard.” Do you think that the young person volunteered anything in a meeting for a long time after that, if ever?

When I began consulting, first within my own organization and, later, outside the company after I retired, I was careful not to put people down and not to be a know-it-all. This was partly driven by bad experiences with consultants who were poor listeners, who treated us like dummies, and told us what we already knew.

Unfortunately, when we did have a really good consultant, we often limited our benefit by not sharing enough information about our problems. A similar thing happened with raw material suppliers. For example, solvent suppliers would say, “What do you need?” and we would say, “What do you have?” We were so close-mouthed about our needs for replacement solvents and solvents with new or better properties that we were no help to them. Yes, a supplier might get an idea for a new solvent from you, and might make it and sell it to everyone, but a new product can provide an edge if you learn how to make better use of it than your competitors.

Misinformation can cause a lot of difficulties. I have seen wasted effort and delays in the solving of problems because of it. People in the field sometimes jump to conclusions regarding coatings defects and possible causes, try all sorts of countermeasures, and push the plant lab or R&D to provide more possible solutions. On receipt of a panel or part with a defect, the analyst finds that the defect is not what was first supposed or there is a completely different cause. Examples include “craters” that turned out to be solvent pops and “dirt” in a primer for plastic parts that turned out to be substrate defects and damage.

When I teach about problem solving, I recommend working on the problem on your own as the first step, pulling together as much information as possible, and asking lots of questions, but being careful about possible misinformation. However, the next step is to talk to others who may have worked on the same or similar problems and may have solutions or useful ideas. Often, organizations have solved given problems many times, but lack of documentation and turnover in personnel lead to solving it all over again.

When a problem is solved and changes are made to prevent it from recurring, too often the reasons for the changes are not communicated. One customer handled this problem by using another form of communication—posters—to convey information as to why paint problems occurred and why process changes had been necessary. For example, the application of a catalyzed spot primer after sand-through of ware produced topcoat mini-volcanoes that required rework. Investigation showed that workers tried to save money by using each batch of primer for several days. The increase in viscosity from day to day led to application of thicker and thicker films. Posters showing the defect and explaining that fresh primer must be prepared and used every day and that only thin films must be applied were put up in several places along the paint line. The problem ceased.

Lack of communication has caused a lot of mischief over the years when information on crater-causing materials that are banned from a paint shop is not shared with contractors, maintenance people, or line workers. There is a list in a file somewhere, but it is not used in training of contractors and new personnel, is not up on the wall in the paint shop, and is of no use. Unfortunately, the list sometimes is so long that its publication causes information overload, but using it in training and picking out the most common sources for posters can help. ☛