Speaker 1:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson:

Whether you're a CEO, public relations professional, truck driver, or preschool student, you are always communicating. Intentionally or not, verbally or non-verbally. You have the skill the moment you enter the world. Dr. Carrisa Hoelscher, Director of Graduate Communication Studies at Missouri State University sets her target on competent communication to help others improve their skill. I'm Nicki Donnelson and Hoelscher is my guest today on the Missouri State Journal. She often examines tensions in collaborative communication, like in committees within the nonprofit or governmental sector.

Carrisa Hoelscher:

And so when you study collaboration, what you're studying is a group of people who are trying to do more with less. They have come together because they see a need, but they also recognize their inability to address that need on their own. And they recognize some shortcomings in the system. And so you see issues, struggles, challenges along the lines of feeling pulled in two different directions. If I'm sitting on a collaborative task force, I might also still have a full-time job where I am expected to get all kinds of other things done. And so I have to compromise or find a balancing point between the needs of the collaboration and my own home organization.

And so dealing with that, that tension of participation, is one of the main ones that's been really pervasive in my scholarship and in other people's literature. What I think is interesting is seeing the sort of new tensions, issues, struggles that we're starting to see come out of this build. And we've been able to turn our attention away from what's happening in the group necessarily, because we now know what those tensions look like. And we've started looking at tensions or issues or struggles connected to the output, what the group is trying to produce.

Nicki Donnelson:

But with these tensions, how do they continue to move forward and promote change?

Carrisa Hoelscher:

Of course, we're going to struggle coming together in trying to work on something, but we're also going to have to deal with the struggle and the something itself. And when you have these social issues, they're always political in nature. So if law enforcement agencies are sitting on a committee and education agencies are sitting on a committee, they don't necessarily want to address social problems in the same way. They're coming at it from two different angles. And so you've got to figure out a way to make changes that everybody agrees with, that are actually logistically feasible. And then, that they are actually an impactful change, they're making a difference, but still accomplishable. So you start pitching changes that are strategically ambiguous. They're vague enough that nobody can really disagree with it, but specific enough that we can actually start to move forward and you can create buy-in that way and address sort of the low-hanging fruit of the problem, if you will.

Nicki Donnelson:

Hoelscher points out that if these small victories can't be won, these task forces may dissolve.

Carrisa Hoelscher:

When you have no common goal, communication has to become the goal, or sharing some sort of communication or some sort of information has to become the goal. You see collaborations like this dissipate all the time. I think, oftentimes, they're because of lack of time and resources, but it's more interesting to me when they're dissipating because you can't get to that agreement, which is frustrating from a social change perspective. And one way to address that issue is to start couching your changes in, what we call in our field, strategic ambiguity.

Nicki Donnelson:

Everyone can implement this knowledge into their work life, Hoelscher says, as we all strive for more competent communication, which encompasses both effectiveness and appropriateness.

Carrisa Hoelscher:

So you're getting the job done. You're being effective. You're getting what you want or what your organization wants or needs, but you're also being appropriate in the sense that you're maintaining relationships. You're not burning bridges along the way. You're being professional, staying respectful. And so if that's your main goal is to communicate competently in any professional setting, then this kind of research focused on tensions can sort of give you a map of the landmines, so to speak. And you can know that when tension comes up in conversations, it's normal and sometimes it's actually good and productive because it leads you to a solution that everybody can agree with. And so if you've got that knowledge paired with a communication skillset, you're able to get to the outcomes everybody wants.

Nicki Donnelson:

That was Dr. Carrisa Hoelscher. I'm Nicki Donnelson, for the Missouri State Journal.

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For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.