

CASE STUDY

The Game of Telephone and Team Communication

In this case study we learn from Liam who was recently promoted into a sales position. We can strengthen key partnerships through better communication.

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

- George Bernard Shaw

In The Telephone Game players sit or stand in a line close enough that whispering is possible. The first person whispers a phrase into the ear of the person to their right. Players whisper the phrase to their neighbors until it reaches the last player. The last player says the phrase out loud so everyone can hear how much it changed from the first whisper. The game highlights how even small misunderstandings end up making a huge difference and the importance of active listening.



Consider Liam’s situation. His client represented 10% of his company’s annual revenue, was a Fortune 50 brand, and had world-class expectations that often stretched thin his company’s resources. In one instance his operations team demanded the client pay for 10 additional computers required to fulfill the contract. The challenge was that neither company anticipated the need enough to build expectations into the contract. The client thought his firm should pay. His company thought the client should pay. His job was to find a solution. Over two weeks he had many conversations and passed critical information between internal and external stakeholders. He clearly communicated the expectations of both parties. However, about three weeks into the project he learned of a conversation between executives within his firm and the client’s firm. During that conversation he was quoted incorrectly, and false expectations were set. As a result, the client relationship was stressed. It was evident that after he spoke to one person, his comments were shared through individuals at different levels of the organization. While unintentional, each time people shared information the facts and important points were changed or omitted.

Liam learned an important lesson through a painful experience. Answer these questions to ensure you do not repeat his errors.

1. What could someone in Liam’s situation do better?
2. What project management or communication tools could have improved the situation?
3. What was the root cause of the issue and how could the challenge be prevented in the future?
4. What high stakes projects are you leading? What did you learn from Liam and how will you apply those lessons?