HOME PAGE:

A Quick Guide on How to Handle an Unresponsive SME

A technical writer has a lot on their plate when it comes to collating data for their final documentation work. Best of luck when you can just use the written accounts or do some online research to be able to describe it.

However, that’s not usually the case as an important aspect of the job is effective communication with other people who will instruct you in the topic you’re writing about. These people are referred to as SMEs which stands for Subject Matter Experts.

Experts in what? You might ask. Their expertise will vary from UX design, customer support, development, engineering, etc. Your understanding of the product or the process you’re writing about will depend heavily on their knowledge and explanation of the matter.

The problem arises when those just as hard-working people as you are difficult to access or not that eager to devote their precious worktime to speak with you.

Hence, here are a few quick tips to help you with an unresponsive SME.

TIP 1: Write the second email.

Sounds silly? Not really! If your SME hasn’t replied to your first e-mail message, perhaps your meeting request has been too vague.

Write the second message only make it a little different. Remind them politely why you’re contacting again, specify in points what it is exactly you’d like to discuss and estimate how much time you need (roughly) to get information for your work. Finally, suggest possible dates you could meet and whether or not they would be suitable for them. This outline will give your SME a much clearer idea of your request. It will also require them to think about and decide on the possible meeting date.

If the e-mail way doesn’t work, don’t hesitate to pay a visit in person in their office. Remember, though, to be friendly and kind when you inquire about the meeting.

TIP 2: Build a friendly rapport

It is highly plausible that your SME works in the same company as yours. They would go for a coffee break or take part in the company’s integration time. Make the most of this time. Be open to people, talk to them, show interest in their expertise but don’t just talk shop. Try chatting about their hobbies and time off work. You never know, perhaps you share common interests which could spark an interesting relationship and make them more amiable in the future to help you.

TIP 3: Don’t feel intimidated.

Despite the SMEs broad knowledge of rocket science or quantum physics they’re still human beings like you and me. There’s no need to feel shy or self-conscious when asking them questions. Use this lack to your advantage and become a curious child who wants to know all about the construction of a boring machine. Remember, though, that you need a basic preparation before the meeting. Make sure you know what a boring machine looks like and what it’s used for. Try to find some information beforehand so that you have a list of concrete questions for them to answer. They will respect this effort and be much happier to explain your doubts and fill in the gaps of your findings.

TIP 4: Be a good and active listener.

A good listener is not one which is staring back at you and nodding obediently to every word you say. You will, obviously, listen more to what your SME has to say on their subject, but active listening means occasional follow-up questions to ask for more details which you will need for your work. Even better if they can show you how the above mentioned boring machine works. Probably, they won’t allow you to use it yourself but I am certain that driving a new car model or using an application won’t be a problem.

TIP 5: Empathy.

Simon Sinek, a business and life coach, said that the key to effective communication is empathy. And I agree. We are people who are going through our daily troubles which frequently affect our work life. As a result, it might occur that your SME might react with anger for being “bothered” time and again about providing you with information for your work. In that case, bear in mind someone might just have a problem they cannot handle emotionally. You don’t have play a psychologist but show empathy and talk about their feelings first before you jump into discussion the boring machine basic functions. Following Simon Sinek: “We have to start practising empathy and relate to what they may be going through and it will profoundly change the decision we make, it will profoundly change the way we see the world.” Don’t forget about yourself too. You have a job to do and sometimes you may not feel strong enough to deliver what other people expect from you.

Conclusion

I reckon that the most serious problem with effective communication today is assuming people are bad and not really eager to help us. The above tips are meant to show you that we should come to others with a positive attitude first. If someone doesn’t want to cooperate, yes, they do have a problem but it may really not be their fault. You have the power to show someone empathy and understanding and you will be surprised how much of this will receive in return.

LINKS:

Film: Simon Sinek on Empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DH2os5VYjE&themeRefresh=1>

An article by Paweł Woźnikowski:

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/five-best-ways-how-tackle-unresponsive-subject-matter-wo%25C5%25BAnikowski/?trackingId=XCVqSqEIRiaboEV0Ulinpw%3D%3D>

An article by Kesi Parker:

<https://medium.com/technical-writing-is-easy/how-to-handle-an-unresponsive-sme-2a5f17953b95>