

What managers need to know about communicating with employees

It's probably happened to you before. As you review the "Communication" portion of the company-wide employee attitude survey results, you get a queasy feeling in your stomach as you see data that indicates a great deal of employee dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of managers as communicators.

"Those darn managers," you think to yourself. "We send them information all the time about company goals and activities and they don't share it with employees."

The reality is that while some managers "get it" about the importance of communicating with employees, many give communication little attention, saying they can't find the time to do it, or some other excuse which may hide deep seated anxieties about their lack of skill in communicating with people. Most disturbing, from a professional communicator's perspective, is the inability of line managers to condense material received from corporate or division and localize it into a form that has meaning for direct reports.



It may be a hi-tech world, but the research continues to show that employee job performance, commitment

and morale are significantly better in work environments where managers put a high priority on face-to-face communication.

All these factors add up to inhibit the effectiveness of face-to-face communication in organizations large and small. And ineffective managerial communication is hurting business results.

It may be a hi-tech world, but the research continues to show that employee job performance, commitment and morale are significantly better in work environments where managers put a high priority on face-to-face communication. As a result, communicators should be devoting a good chunk of their time to fostering effective managerial communication.

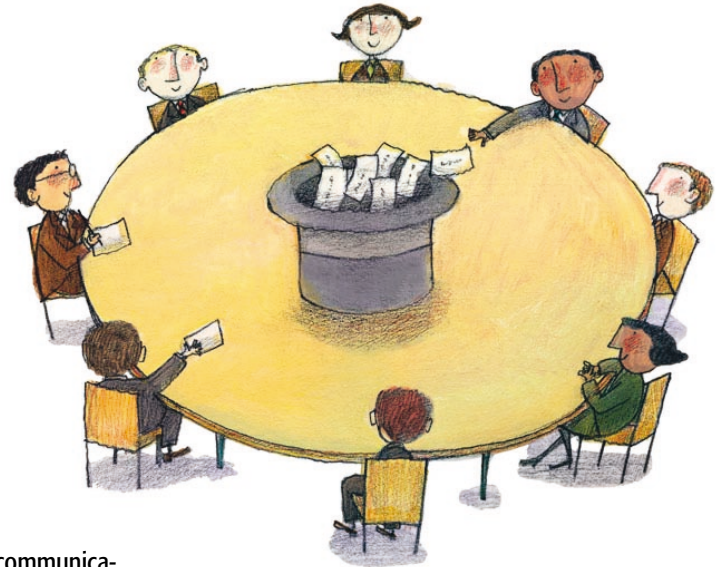
What follows are some tips for educating your managers about their important role in communication and teaching them how to effectively do it.

STEP 1: Make the business case for effective communications:

manager-to-manager, staff group-to-staff group. A lot of managers think communication is one of those nice things to do, "when I have time." You, as the communicator, must show them the proof that effective face-to-face communication is a tool for competitive advantage – a means to an end and a difference maker in achieving improved business results, employee satisfaction and retention.

The landmark Watson Wyatt studies showing the link between effective manager communication and increased shareholder return are a powerful data point. Another is the recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management which shows that three of the top eight factors related to employee job satisfaction are linked to communication effectiveness.

The most persuasive way to make the business case is (guess what?) through face-to-face contact with managers. Make time in your schedule to go and talk about manager communication at staff meetings held at unit and department levels in your organization. Or, meet with managers one-to-one. Whatever you



do, get out and persuade, and listen to what managers have to say in response.

STEP 2: Teach managers the importance of preparation

for communication. The quality of many staff meetings and one-to-one discussions is unsatisfactory because the manager didn't take time to plan out the topics that needed to be covered or the key points that needed to be emphasized. Instruct your managers about the importance of planning out in advance what they want to say and how they are going to say it. Provide your managers with background information to help them communicate effectively.

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STEP 3: **Teach managers the art of key message delivery.** The most successful companies drive key messages over and over again throughout the year to reinforce what's most important and set the groundwork for the discipline in execution needed to achieve organizational goals.

Educate your managers about how to deliver key messages in communication, versus just "dumping" information. Teach them how to wrap a key message around specific events or developments that occur during the year, such as a key competitor winning a big order from a client of yours due to lower cost.

STEP 4: **Teach managers where to go to get information and how to use various mediums to communicate.**

Give your managers a primer on web sites to visit and other resources they can access, like employee publications, to get helpful background information to use in employee communication.

Teach them about the kinds of content they should be emphasizing in their employee meetings, consistent with organizational goals and their unit and department goals. And teach them how to use various mediums to communicate. For example, e-mail is OK for delivering fast facts or answering simple questions, but face-to-face is best for problem-solving, persuading people to a certain point of view or dealing with sensitive matters. Through training or other means, provide guidance to your managers about how to use e-mail and set up and run employee meetings.



STEP 5: **Teach managers the importance of understanding the differences in employees and the importance of providing regular feedback to each of them.** Two of the biggest complaints heard from 21st century employees is that managers don't take the time to really understand their needs and what makes them tick as employees and as people, and managers don't provide employees with regular feedback about their work performance.

Teach your managers to understand the differences in people – differences in personal needs, personalities, cultural background – and tailor their talk to the needs of each individual.

Meanwhile, lack of regular performance feedback inhibits employee productivity in the workplace. The year-end performance appraisal should be a summary of what was talked about with the employee throughout the year, not a one-time-a-year forum for performance discussion. Today's employees are an anxiety-ridden lot, and desire constant feedback about how they are doing.

Teach your managers the importance of providing ongoing feedback – both good and bad – as events unfold during the year.

Teach them that feedback is a means to reinforce, correct and reward behaviors and a performance appraisal system is a tool to engage, excite and retain employees.



Some best practice tips in managerial communication

■ "MINI-MEETING" PROGRAMS

Managers always complain about lack of time to conduct employee meetings. A number of companies found a workable solution for this dilemma through introduction of programs in which managers meet with employee groups for 5-15 minutes each day or several times a week. Such "mini-meetings" cover work unit performance, company information and people matters. Companies like FedEx, GE and WalMart apply this concept very successfully as an integral part of their operational approach. We'll discuss this concept in-depth in a future issue of *Ideas*.

■ WEB SITES FOR MANAGERS

A growing number of companies have created web sites for managers that become a one-stop resource for information related to key messages, company goals, talk points on key subjects and tips for effective communication. To see a demonstration of the graphic design and content of such a web site, visit Motiv8 Communications online at www.motiv8comm.com and click on the link to the *CoachOnline* manager support tool.

■ MANAGER COMMUNICATION COUNCILS

Several companies have formed a cross-functional group, consisting of 8-12 managers, to advise the employee communication team on the formation and implementation of manager communication support programs. Input from such groups often leads to more effective implementation and council members can be utilized to help influence the participation of their peers.

■ COMMUNICATION TRAINING

One of the most effective ways to educate managers is to have them complete some training. Customize the training for your needs, versus sending them to a generic off-the-shelf program. Training for higher level managers is often more effective if it's conducted in a mini-session, one-to-one format.

For others, a half day or full day communication training program taught by a professional trainer meets the need. Limit attendance to a maximum of 20 people and have lots of participative exercises. At one company in CT, managers received training in an afternoon session, applied what they were taught in class the following morning back on the job, and returned to class in the afternoon to discuss their experiences.



Communication training: Here's what to teach

If you are developing a communication training program for your managers and supervisors, focus on teaching practical, real world content versus theory. Your training should include at least some of these elements:

- Why communication is important (making the business case)
- Understanding the differences in people (basic needs, personality, cultural, age differences)
- What employees want and need to know (content you want them to talk about such as service needs, performance, quality, competitive environment)
- How to conduct and run a meeting (1-1 and in work group meetings)
- How to handle difficult situations (conflict, meetings off-track)
- Giving effective employee performance feedback
- Manager's role as communicator
- Personal communication planning
- Building line of sight between the job and organizational goals
- Creating and delivering key messages.

"We include all of these elements in our communication training program," notes Ron Hess, president of Motiv8 Communications, "and it's important that managers and supervisors be

given time to practice the skills they are taught in the classroom. We work with the communication manager to develop scenarios that duplicate real situations managers face back on the job."

Hess has been involved in manager/supervisor communication training and support for over 20 years. Here are the most common mistakes he sees managers make in communication with their employees:

- Fails to communicate performance expectations and business goals and provide employees with regular performance feedback during the year
- Infrequent personal contact with employees
- Dismisses questions, inputs and suggestions
- Fails to adequately plan out communication with employees, both in meetings and in 1-1 situations
- Ignores the differences in people
- Fails to put information and key messages in context, and



- Doesn't explain how the "dots connect" between marketplace realities, managerial expectations, business goals and individual work effort.

"When I conduct training," Hess adds, "it always astounds me to see the individual light bulbs click on when I tell them that 80% of their workday as a manager or supervisor involves communications, so why not make that 80% the best it can be! Many have never thought of communication as a business tool to achieve their goals -- they lack knowledge of the power of communication to maximize employee performance."

For more information about Motiv8's communication training program, you can contact Ron Hess by e-mail at motiv8comm@aol.com or call: 862-322-9082.

Face-to-face versus electronic: the tug-of-war continues



There's a great tug of war going on in employee communication programs today. On one side stands face-to-face communication; on the other side stands electronic communication. In a recent article in IABC's Communication World magazine, corporate communicator and former IABC President Bard Whitworth, eloquently stated the case for face-to-face: **"Many employee communication programs today continue to ignore managers in favor of one-way, mass-media channels. To stay in step with the times, these programs have replaced yesterday's unidirectional vehicles, such as magazines, newsletters and bulletin boards, with sexier and seemingly lower cost alternatives such as intranet portals, web meetings, e-mails, broadcast voicemails, streaming videos and more. In doing so, these companies often subordinate or completely eliminate the most credible channel from their programs: one-to-one communication with the immediate manager."** The solution to the problem? Balanced and effective utilization of various channels.

Happy Workers



They're every boss's dream.
Or should be.

By Donna Callea, Business Writer, Daytona Beach News Journal

People who feel valued, respected, listened-to and essential to the success of an organization, tend to be more productive, according to Ron Hess, a Port Orange-based national expert on employee communications. They like coming to work and are good for a company's bottom line, he said.

Trouble is, these days a significant number of workers are neither very happy nor very productive.

Last week the U.S. Labor Department reported that employee productivity – the amount of output per hour of work – fell 0.6 percent during the final three months of 2005. Which is not a good sign.

Meanwhile, recent national studies have found job satisfaction is also on the downside. Half of all workers are unhappy with their jobs, according to a survey released last year by The Conference



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Board, a New-York-based business research group. Only 14 percent of workers described themselves as very satisfied with their jobs.

"You don't see as many smiling faces," Hess said.

Employees today feel a lot more pressure, tension and stress than in the past, he noted, which can negatively impact performance.

"The objective is to show people you care about them," he stressed, which helps create a better and more productive workplace.

But it doesn't have to be that way, contended the former employee communications manager for General Electric. The key can be as simple as forging open, honest, trusting and friendly relationships between managers and the people who report to them, he said. In other words, a supervisor shouldn't wait until annual evaluation time to tell a worker he or she has been doing a lousy job all year. There should be an ongoing give and take of ideas, sharing of information and goals, airing of problems and concerns, and as much positive feedback as possible.

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"The objective is to show people you care about them," he stressed, which helps create a better and more productive workplace.

Jerry Tarnow, materials manager at Thompson Pump in Port Orange, where he has 25 people reporting to him, couldn't agree more.

"I tell everybody they have to look forward to coming to work or they're in the wrong place," said Tarnow, who's been with the company nine years. "I'm just a firm believer that if you're not having a good time and you're not happy, you're

Editor's Note: The following article about the value of employee communications recently appeared in the Daytona Beach (FL) News Journal.



not going to do a good job." He said he makes sure those working for him know what's expected of them as part of the team. But Tarnow also makes it his business to get to know his people as human beings.

Tim Branz, information systems director at DuvaSawko in Daytona Beach, said his managerial role models include some of the baseball coaches and teachers he's had.

Their mission was "to see the people they 'manage' manage themselves according to the goals trying to be accomplished," said Branz, whose department has five people.

Developing such relationships "is not just a nice thing to do," Hess said. "It also makes good sense for business."

"Like any good baseball manager or teacher who takes the time to know the strengths and weaknesses of a player or student, I try and do the same with my colleagues . . .," he noted, through a combination of observation, project results and "genuine casual conversation."

Developing such relationships "is not just a nice thing to do," Hess said. "It also makes good sense for business."