

Why Won't They Listen?

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Abstract

Ask any group of business managers to name the one organisational problem that frustrates them most, and which is often at the core of operational snafus, and more often than not you'll hear that it's poor communication. The National Council of Compensation Insurers has estimated that as much as 40% of workers' compensation costs can be linked to how an employer communicates with, and responds to, worker injuries. Poor communication stands out in both performance literature and management practice as the number one cause of substandard performance in many organizations, cited frequently for: low productivity, late delivery, poor quality, low morale, workplace accidents, and most other undesirable events impacting profitability. Tips are presented to aid managers in effective safety communications with their employees, including: 1. Communicate through supervisors. 2. Require that communications be face-to-face. 3. Communicate information that is specifically relevant to employees and their work.

Ask any group of business managers to name the one organizational problem that frustrates them most, and which is often at the core of operational snafus, and I'll bet more often than not you'll hear: "Poor communication!" That goes for accident and injury costs as well. The National Council of Compensation Insurers has estimated that as much as 40 percent of workers' compensation costs can be linked to how an employer communicates with, and responds to, worker injuries.

Communications expert John Drebing says: "You attain the next level of excellence by changing who you are. And you change who you are by changing what you do." When it comes to designing, implementing and administrating an effective safety communications process, researchers suggest that many organizations need to take a closer look at what they do.

With few exceptions, poor communication stands out in both performance literature and management practice as the number one cause of substandard performance in many organizations. It's cited frequently for: low productivity, late delivery, poor quality, low morale, workplace accidents and most other undesirable events impacting profitability. In *A Passion for Excellence*, Tom Peters and Nancy Austin concluded: "Non-functional communication is at the heart of most management problems." Most operations executives agree, allocating millions annually to improve the situation. Yet in spite of this recognition and huge financial commitment, communication problems persist.

In titling this article, I actually faced this exact dilemma. I'll bet most readers, to this point, assumed I was referring to 'employees' as those who just won't listen. Oh well, another case of poor communication! The title, and theme of this article, addresses effective communication as a management opportunity - not an employee problem. It is managers that need to listen (and learn), say researchers and management experts such as Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, who identifies communication as the fifth habit: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

When it comes to communication and credibility, employees in America's workplaces have some very definite opinions, and they're not very complimentary. Spend a fair amount of time in employee lunchrooms or break areas, and eventually you'll hear this all too common satirical question: "How can you tell when an executive is lying?" Answer in unison: "Their lips are moving!"

According to the findings of an ASCLU workplace survey published in the August 1997 issue of Fast Company, 93 percent of respondents acknowledged that they lie regularly; 56 percent admitted they have been pressured to act unethically, and 48 percent have committed illegal acts. Last December, National Public Radio's Web site listing the top 10 strategy and business books was introduced this way: "Not surprisingly, books about scandals dominated the best-selling business books of 2003. Perhaps the Budweiser Lizard was insightfully correct in his observation: 'Never send a weasel to do a ferret's job.'" (Oh, how I love that commercial.)

Wrong Advice

Research on organisational communication suggests that the majority of advice given to business executives on how to effectively communicate with frontline employees is wrong. To move information through an organization, many companies establish corporate communications departments that focus on word-smithing, format and technology to facilitate internal messaging. The answer to many organizational communication problems, however, doesn't lie in the message content or the technology, but rather in the methods employed.

Think about the traditional communication mindset in your own organization. What methods are most frequently used by upper management to communicate safety information to frontline employees? Make a list of these techniques, and then arrange them in order of perceived effectiveness. This exercise might seem simplistic, but it reveals the prevalence of what I call the "I've got the bull by the horns" phenomena - the belief that senior management understands the information needs and controls the messaging process.

At this point, let's cut to the heart of the issue. If we want to find out what is most important to, and how to most effectively communicate with, frontline employees, whom should we ask? Who would know best? Who are the experts?

Employees, of course. Bottom line, if we're not communicating successfully with employees on safety issues, it's most likely a matter of technique and approach. We need to determine why our messaging fails and change our approaches accordingly.

When it comes to effective communication, what we desire, and what we in fact attain are indeed very different. Ask a bank teller, computer programmer, machine operator, truck driver or office worker and you'll quickly learn that frontline employees of all titles and roles:

1. Distrust information they receive from senior managers;
2. Believe that company publications are propaganda;
3. Hate watching executives on videos;
4. Don't bother reading those annoying leaflets in their pay envelopes, and
5. Have little interest in receiving general corporate information.

Contrary to common beliefs, frontline employees have little interest in receiving anything that doesn't directly impact them or their work. If a company's communication program isn't targeted directly to the worker and his or her specific interests, it's wasted paper (or e-time). Most isn't... and hence most is!

The critical question then is, "what works?" Much research has been conducted to determine that, and the findings are enlightening. A common corporate assumption is that employees want information directly from senior managers via mass techniques such as satellite telecasts, corporate meetings, road shows, executive stump speeches and feature articles in the company newspaper. NOT!

These approaches assume that employees perceive senior executives as well-informed and credible. An unfortunate reality, however, is that employees frequently distrust senior managers. Employees

trust one person in their work environment most - their supervisor; the person they work with daily and communicate with routinely. Employees view their immediate supervisor as their most credible source of honest and objective information. In view of this, they prefer to receive and most readily accept communication from him or her. Why? Because they trust them.

Evidence supporting this includes:

- * A Wyatt Consulting study (England) finding that 70 percent of employees felt the information they received from management was misleading; and,

- * A Lou Harris & Associates Poll (United States and Canada) revealing that 62 percent of office workers were not confident that management was honest in their dealings with them.

In contrast:

- * A major U.S. auto manufacturer's study confirming that 83 percent of employees rank their immediate supervisor as their most believable source; and

- * Australian researcher Dennis Taylor's findings that 90 percent of Australian employees believed their supervisor was either "always or normally" telling the truth.

From these studies by researchers Sandar and T.J. Larkin, three truths have emerged as guide posts for designing effective organizational communications for safety:

Truth 1: The most effective communication to frontline employees comes directly from their immediate supervisors.

Supervisors are the opinion leaders for frontline employees. They are the ones that have earned credibility and, hence, are the ones that can most influence employee behaviours. A top or mid-level manager's success in communicating on safety depends upon their success in communicating with supervisors!

Many corporate communications initiatives are inconsistent with this fact. In practice, communication is dominated by "top-to-bottom" approaches, (i. e., open-door policies, MBWA, direct lines to the boss, etc.) which create supervisory bypasses, weaken supervisory credibility and result in a "not so good news/bad news" scenario.

The "not so good news" is employees take this stuff seriously. When told they have a direct line, they use it. Problems, concerns and questions rise up and inundate executive offices, resulting in organizational overload and slow response, which further damages management's credibility and fuels employee cynicism.

The "bad news" is, when executives do respond to employee concerns on a timely basis and fix problems, the message sent to frontline employees is clear: "Hey, if you want something done around here, you gotta take it up top!" (The ultimate bypass: front line to top line.) It's the start of clogged communication arteries and organizational paralysis!

CEOs embrace communication approaches such as these because they truly believe they favourably impact employee behaviours. An A. Foster Higgins study of 164 Fortune 500 CEOs found that 97 percent felt their communications affected employee satisfaction, and 75 percent believed it impacted job performance. Evidence, however, confirming that direct communication from executives to frontline employees positively impacts work behaviour is slim, while there is a wealth of evidence to the contrary.

To impact safe employee behaviour, managers must increase the perceived power of supervisors by communicating credible information to them and by establishing them as the "credible source" for employees. It is not an employee's relationship with a CEO that impacts safe work performance; it is the employee's communication relationship with their supervisor that is most important. A strong credible relationship at this level minimizes distortion.

Studies confirm that somewhere between the CEO (sender) and frontline employees (receivers), organizational messages are distorted, and the snag is generally middle management, for a myriad of reasons. Because of this, executive messages don't trickle down as conceived, nor do they have the impact on performance expected. This supports Larkin's second communication truth:

Truth 2: Effective communication must be delivered "face-to-face" by supervisors.

Dick Vitale would say: "Get in their face, baby!" He'd be right because supervisors are the information sources most recognized and trusted by employees.

Unfortunately, executives often don't see this and continue traditional communication campaigns, publications, video reports and meetings. The problem is what executives have to say generally doesn't interest frontline employees. I've seen this first hand; perhaps you have as well? One company with which I am familiar tried to communicate corporate challenges and results to regional staff by sending the president and a contingent of senior staff on a dog-and-pony show every spring to deliver a "state of the company" message to all regional employees. These sessions always ended with: "Are there any questions?" There never were, and not because the meetings were highly insightful or informative. Zzzzzzz! To avoid embarrassment, local managers would plant questions in the audience. Therefore, they continued.

Researcher Larkin identifies British Telecom as an interesting case in point. British Telecom is reported to have one of the most respected corporate communication programs in the world, consisting of numerous proactive initiatives. Yet, their results in informing their work force were only slightly better than the United Kingdom's average; (i.e., British Telecom's average of 42 percent of employees well-informed versus the United Kingdom's average of 40 percent.). Why did all of this effort produce such a small difference? Larkin suggests it was because it conflicted with communication truths #1 and #2. It wasn't delivered by supervisors and wasn't done face-to-face.

Truth 3: Frontline employees are only interested in information that directly affects them, their job and their immediate work.

This is more commonly referred to as: 'WIIFM' (What's In It For Me). If management is not broadcasting to these "call letters," employees aren't going to tune into the message. Executives can talk about risk patterns, loss trends, accident rates, insurance costs and corporate strategy, but to the frontline employees, that's all irrelevant. Employees don't think like managers because employees aren't managers. Employees have different beliefs, concerns and interests. Employees don't have bad attitudes; they just don't value the same things managers do. CEOs need to understand that how they communicate, more than what they communicate, is the critical issue - at least to those with whom they are trying to communicate.

Employees interpret information that isn't specifically targeted to them, about them, or for them with cynicism. As far as they're concerned, it's "BOHICA" (Bend Over, Here It Comes Again!)

Not typical? An exaggeration? Not in this organization, you say? Unfortunately, it's truer than most would like to admit. Research confirms the reality of distrust and cynicism between management and employees: (Larkin)

* A Hay Management Consulting Group (Canada) study: "Only 50 percent of employees have pride in their companies;"

* A Hay Group study in the United States: "70 percent of hourly employees lack confidence in top management;"

* A Boston University School of Management survey: "80 percent of workers felt management could not be trusted."

Consider the reality (i.e., employee perceptions) in your own organization. Have your company's best efforts to communicate a sincere interest in safety improvement ended up with cynical employee responses, such as: "Safety is Our #1 Priority" changed on the work floor to read: "Safety Is Our #1 Slogan"?

Executive intentions, although admirable, aren't good enough. What matters in effective communication is an understanding of what information employees need and want. Employees want to know how they're doing, what changes are planned and what it means specifically for them. Employees need feedback that is relevant to their work environment and which will help them perform better.

If managers want to improve safe behaviour, they must shed a number of traditional communication beliefs and approaches, and invest in building a communication process guided by the three core "truths" of effective communication:

1. Communicate through supervisors (to build strong first line trust and credibility),
2. Require that communications be "face-to-face" (to allow for feedback, expression and dialogue), and
3. Communicate information that is specifically relevant to employees and their work (address their WIIFM questions).

Watch for our next issue where our journey to effective communications continues to the strange new worlds of "NETMA" and "TMSIADK."

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