



COMMUNICATION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY AND RAPID CHANGE

What's moving faster than the speed of light? Just a hint: It isn't Superman! Companies and their employees are coping with more and more in real time. E-mail and faxes have replaced letters and telephone tag. Mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances and partnering have left most employees wondering who's on first.

In times of uncertainty and rapid change, when employees are under pressure and experiencing conflicting priorities, effective organizational communication is a discriminator between the corporate winners and losers. Why? When people understand what a company is thinking about, relative to business challenges, objectives, tactics, and what they can do to contribute, employees are more focused... and focus leads to shared beliefs, goals, and usually success.

What are the typical reactions of corporate managers to communication in times of change and uncertainty? A few business leaders seem apprehensive about even saying the word communication, while some fail to take the time to convey what their employees need to know, and many just wait. Wait for the changes to settle down. Wait for legislation to be passed. Wait for data to come in. Wait for the information to be analyzed, and analyzed, and analyzed. Wait it out with a few colleagues, withdrawing from the broader employee population. Waiting for the answers, fear of the unknown, and difficulty in deciding among alternatives are all reasons that business leaders avoid communication.

And how do employees react to a lack of information? Like any void ... it gets filled. Most employees get very skilled at reading tea leaves. They interpret actions in sometimes strange and incongruous ways. They may scapegoat the few people that are trying to make a difference, change the organization, or who are different. Workers often create and perpetuate rumors. Stories take on lives of their own. Others may be quietly anxious, fearful of doing anything, positive or negative, knowing they will be noticed. Some employees leave the company. So what's the answer?

Speak up and be heard. Find dozens of ways to communicate. Look for small, seemingly inconspicuous ways, like conversations in the hall, discussions while riding in a car, sitting in the lunchroom. Use important central means too, like company-wide meetings, videotapes, broadcast e-mail and newsletters. Never resort to one mode of communication.

The other equally important aspect of communication is listening. One way to learn something you don't already know is to close your mouth and open your ears. Too often we forget to really listen and hear what the other person is saying. All of us are egocentric to some degree, and sometimes very naive. We often assume others see and experience the same things we do. Maybe, as a senior person in your organization, you fail to understand the frustrations encountered by employees on a day-to-day basis: getting timely return calls from a client or customer; getting cooperation from a co-worker or a subcontractor or vendor; receiving help or even a response from a support person, etc. Try to remember when you didn't have an important sounding title. It's a valuable walk back in time.

Listening nondefensively and nonjudgementally can also give you valuable input

on clients, customers, products, services, and emerging trends. Essentially, careful listening can provide you with important information about your business. Creative people often remark that they get their best insights and ideas by being aware. Business leaders who bring that same openness to their companies step ahead of the competition.

Why don't we communicate? One answer is the unassailable fear of putting anything in writing. If we are publicly traded, we are concerned about media distortions and analysts' reactions. If we're private, we worry about what competitors will learn. Reality is that some information is already known, and further, perceptions are possibly more detrimental than any truth.

We say we trust our employees, it's the others we're not so sure about... another reason we don't communicate orally or in writing. But, I'm not so sure. Most times, we don't act like we trust our employees. One example is financial data. We instruct financial managers to guard such information and not disclose the secrets to anyone beyond a small select group of employees (e.g., Board of Directors and a few executives). Consequently, senior managers are not given budget data or year-to-date financial information to make intelligent decisions, and are forced to operate in a fiscal information vacuum. And, if we do distribute any financial data, it is carefully massaged and homogenized beyond recognition.

Communication to employees about business issues: trends, regulatory matters, corporate strengths, finances and technology, just to name a few areas, is vital. Communication helps employees become part of the solution. Communication is the only way I know to get people involved and unless people are involved, they can't be committed, and unless people are committed, your business strategy likely will fail. So, speak up, let your employees hear you, and together move on to success.

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