

Consistency and proper message context are often the holes in the armor of a team leader's communication strategy. This article describes the tools to translate senior management's "big picture" messages into relevant and effective information sharing for employees.

TEAM LEADERS AND THE COMMUNICATION LOOP

Connecting with employees versus selling an idea

While public relations departments develop and deliver increasingly sophisticated and attractive communications messaging mechanisms, research consistently verifies that employees look first to their managers and supervisors for information about the organization. Unfortunately, research also confirms that too many team leaders are ill-equipped to deliver on employee expectations. But the very complexity of the organizations striving to succeed in today's global village demands that team leaders become motivators of those they lead, champions of the corporate cause, and missionaries for productivity.

In 1993, we were working with the new CEO of a deeply troubled, large multi-faceted and multi-national insurance company to develop communications strategies and initiatives directed at its myriad internal and external stakeholders. The company, with CDN\$31 billion in assets, was being scrutinized on all fronts for investment policies that had led to substantial losses. To protect its policyholders, the company entered into a takeover process with another insurance

company, which in turn required a due diligence review.

To help prepare employees across the organization for the due diligence process, we developed a comprehensive communications strategy, a key ingredient of which was to regularly provide managers and supervisors in three countries with information to share with their teams. However, it was quickly evident that many of them did not know how to communicate, or elicit feedback. It was still critical to a smooth due diligence process that information be shared in a timely, consistent way across the organization, downward and back upwards. So we developed a crash course in communications "best practices," and conducted orientation sessions for team leaders to prepare them for the personal challenges of communicating significant events. In a two-hour workshop, they were presented with an overview of some key communication principles; given a set of talking points; and provided with a continuous, weekly process for gathering feedback, sending that feedback to a central

KEYPOINTS

- Team leaders need training and support to develop a strategy for sharing information and obtaining feedback from team members.
- When team leaders are guided through an experiential learning process, their ability and understanding of communication in their daily work lives improves dramatically.
- Corporate “big messages” must be balanced and interpreted to make them relevant to team members.
- Effective communication occurs when there’s understanding and personal impact is respected.
- The goal of good communication is that the employee understands what’s proposed, rather than trying to “sell” an idea.
- Management needs to keep team leaders informed so that they can better decide how and when to share information with their teams.
- Strategic thinking is key to communication, and preparing and presenting information in the most appropriate way.

“clearing house,” and receiving and sharing head office responses.

The process not only worked, but when, some two months later, there was an effort to reduce the frequency of the weekly meetings, managers and supervisors reported that both they and their teams wanted to continue the process. They found it very informative and, interestingly, therapeutic.

Eventually, the company collapsed. In fact, it is to this day the largest-ever failure of a financial institution in North America. However, right to the end, employee loyalty and commitment remained remarkably high. Why? Because all the employees in the company were in the loop, kept there week by week by their managers and supervisors who were communicating in all directions, all of the time.

The lesson

This experience reinforced what we had already learned over the years: that effective downward internal communication is a fragile proposition at the best of times, and that effective two-way communication driven by team leaders in difficult times was impossible in the absence of two core ingredients. The first: the skill to think and communicate strategically; and the second, to fortify their continued ability to be strategic with simple but effective tools.

With that lesson foremost in our minds, we spent considerable time researching and developing a process to help managers and supervisors become sound communicators. Because, after all, most managers and supervisors are hired or promoted to team leader status not because of communication excellence, but as a result of strong and proven technical skills. Consequently, many team leaders are lackluster-to-poor communicators. More often than not, their sense of “good communication” is to simply pass on a message they get from their bosses or

senior management. And as often as not, they are unable to explain the operating implications of the message; they are unable to give effective direction or provide constructive feedback, because they simply do not know how.

So the real challenge is how to make communication an integral part of every team leader’s toolbox. Why? Because without consistency and proper message context, we create “Cones of Confusion” throughout organizations.

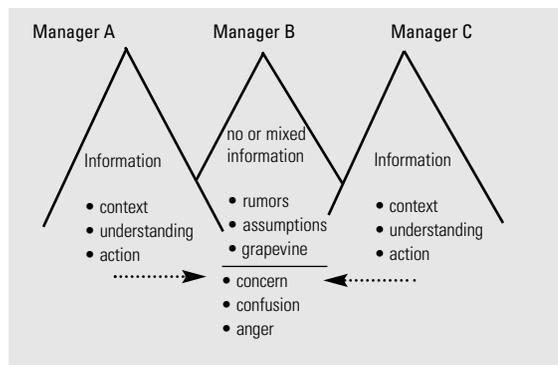
Avoiding the Cones

Cones of Confusion™ present a major obstacle to internal communications, and, by extension, corporate credibility and trust in management. Cones of Confusion emerge when there’s inconsistent sharing of information, in our experience resulting from either team leaders not understanding the implication of the corporate message, or not knowing how to share it, or sometimes both.

The bottom line result of Cones of Confusion is that different work teams receive differing and inconsistent sets of messages. This is best illustrated through the model in Figure One, below.

As a result of poor communication from Manager B, members in Team B, for example, 

Figure One: The cones of confusion



Bart Mindszenty, APR, Fellow CPRS, and Gail Roberts are partners in the Toronto-based Mindszenty & Roberts Corporation, a niche boutique founded in 1990 that specializes in issues, major change, conflict, and crisis communications/management. Since the mid-90s, they have increasingly focused on team leader communications practices, working with organizations in all sectors to help managers and supervisors embrace strategic communications thinking and practices.

Communication training at the Canadian Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA)

Formerly a department of the federal government, The Ottawa-based CCRA was recently given “agency” status and is still undergoing major changes. Regional Director of Communications, Jean Ouimet, reports that training for managers and supervisors on how to improve communication with their teams is proving to be critical and explains that team leaders are embracing training and benefiting from it. He notes that “feedback from our managers is consistent. They’re telling us that the training is helping them be strategic in planning their communications, whether simple one-on-one, or complex team meetings. Best of all, they’re applying the range of planning tools we’re giving them, and finding that those tools make it easier to prepare how to communicate appropriately in different situations.”

They have much less information than the members in Teams A and C. And because the grapevine works remarkably well in most organizations where information flow is inconsistent, Team B members will hear the information as interpreted by members of Teams A and C. This will drive Team B members to assume that their own manager is not sharing the information he or she has, and reach faulty conclusions because no context has been set for them.

However, when team leaders are guided through an experiential learning process – even one that’s of relatively short duration – their understanding of the power and benefit of applying effective communication to their daily work lives, and their ability to do it, invariably improves. Such training, coupled with some very clear, easy-to-apply guides for planning various communication initiatives, results in dramatically improved communication between team leaders and their teams.

Balancing the “big picture”

For communications to work effectively in any organization, the corporate “big picture” messages must be balanced with the interpretation of what those messages mean to specific divisions and teams within the

Peer to peer training at VECO

VECO is an engineering and construction company that undertook the Exxon Valdez oil spill clean-up in Alaska. Shona Welsh, VECO’s training director, spearheaded a communications training program in 2000 through which managers were trained to train peers.

Welsh reports that one manager, using newly-learned communications strategies, considerably reduced the amount of time it took him to receive “I didn’t try to ‘sell’ my ideas,” the manager explained, “I simply anticipated and addressed their concerns before they asked.”

VECO now requires all management development participants to enroll in the communications program.

organization. The Arch of Understanding™, conceived some 15 years ago to help a management team of engineers conceptualize the process, best illustrates the point.

The keystone is the employee. He or she supports the organization, and, in turn, is firmly in place because of the support from the two halves of the arch. The left side of the arch is the “big picture” messages of senior management: the vision, mission, objectives, status, challenges, and opportunities. The right side of the arch represents the “So what does this mean to me as an employee and us as a team?” This arch is the communications planned and applied by the team leader. It’s not a mere repetition of what senior management has said (which is the case all too often), but actually an interpretation of the messages so that they will be relevant to team members. Specifically, the team leader explains the impact of the corporate message/action/direction so team members will understand the implications for them, their jobs, and how they are performed.

When managers and supervisors know how to think, plan, and communicate strategically rather than tactically, the Arch of Understanding will all but eliminate Cones of Confusion. (All but, because we have never seen an organization where every team leader can communicate strategically all of the time, despite their best intentions.)

Stop selling the big idea

In all of our work with management we stress that a major impediment to effective communication occurs when organizations try to “sell” an idea or initiative. Because management believes in something, it wants line employees to not just embrace, but “like” it too. We see this happening day in and day out, in all sectors. It’s the inability of a surprising number of management teams to understand that their fellow employees down the line are not children to be led and co-opted, but colleagues to be respected and given the opportunity to make up their own minds.

To that end, for communications to work well, it’s imperative to accept that workplace – or any place – communication is a process of “connecting.” In order to illustrate this to a group of nuclear scientists we were working with a decade ago, we developed what has become the cornerstone of our teaching: the Hierarchy of Communications™.

Effective communication starts with understanding and respecting personal impact.

Seldom will anyone listen to – or even hear – your message if they believe you have not at least recognized that they have concerns, issues, dreams and fears that they expect you to recognize. It's for this reason that all good communication starts with listening and acknowledging our awareness of the position or concerns of others, even if we do not have concrete solutions to offer them. Only when others know that we are tuned into their world will they give time and attention to look at ours. Next, is awareness. If we have made the connection, then we start creating an opportunity to generate a level of awareness of our messages. And sometimes, all we need to do is create some sense of awareness.

The goal

The objective is to get to understanding. Understanding is when employees are clear on objectives, roles and goals, implications, and their responsibilities. Then they can make an informed decision as to how they feel and how they will respond to any issue or initiative. With understanding, every employee can perform his or her job; whether or not he or she likes what's happening is not something management can do anything about, short of changing directions. That's why we draw a line at understanding.

If we communicate for acceptance, we are, in fact, marketing and trying to sell. Acceptance is something employees either will or will not reach, but they will do so on their own. The more we push for acceptance, the more they will resist. We must give them space and time to accept. And trust and support are gifts employees bestow on a management that's consistent over time in its walk and its talk.

The bottom line

There's nothing mysterious about achieving workplace communication excellence. What's a mystery, though, is why so many organizations place such a high priority on good communication practices by team leaders, yet do so little to support and nurture them.

So what do managers and supervisors say helps them the most in becoming more strategic, improved communicators? Here are the five consistent themes we've heard in the past 18 months from more than 1,500 team leaders in a cross-section of Canadian organizations:

- Team leaders need the right information at the right time from the top. When senior management puts them in the know, they can determine when and how to share

Interpreting corporate messages at Kodak Canada

Faced with rapid, significant technological changes impacting the company's operations and corporate culture, Kodak Canada last year recognized that the need for effective employee communications had never been greater. Jack Scott, director of communications and public affairs, reports that "Our challenge was to provide the broad management team with an understanding of the principles of effective two-way communications and the means to improve. We focused on interpreting the global corporate messages into meaningful, actionable information at the local level."

"We've observed an overall improvement in the quality of communications, with managers demonstrating greater confidence due to understanding the communications process better. Perhaps the most significant benefit is that managers now communicate for 'understanding' so employees can determine for themselves the merit of management initiatives."

information so that their teams will be better informed about organizational direction, change and expectations.

- Given some focused training in good communication principles, they now know much more than they did about why communication is important and what it can achieve when planned and delivered strategically.
- With a toolkit that helps them plan their messaging, they can communicate much more effectively, and do it more consistently.
- Their teams are more accepting of the messages that they deliver, because the manager is providing clear, understandable, realistic information in context; and they are listening more effectively while offering constructive feedback.
- They feel more comfortable communicating frequently and even communicating "bad news" messages, because they know how to think strategically, how to prepare for sharing information, and how to present it most appropriately.

Can it get any better than that?

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