

Communications That Mean Business

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How do you get an effective employee communications system? It is an issue which causes many companies great frustration. And it's not because they're not trying. They all believe in the value of good employee communications, but despite spending lots of time and effort on the subject, they do not seem to get the pay-off their hard work and application would merit. Why?

The major trouble is that most managements are not clear about what actual pay-off they expect their communications system to deliver. When asked why they want to "communicate", they say things like "to keep people informed", or "so that people know what is going on in the business", and other such generalities. They take on a great burden of work preparing and delivering communications to their workforces, but employees do not appear to derive any greater job satisfaction as a result, nor does the performance of the business seem to improve significantly as a consequence. The outcome simply does not seem to justify all the hard work and effort.

So here are some guideline rules, developed over years of observation and experiment, which will ensure your communications process actually delivers real benefits to company and employees alike.

Focus Communications on Improving Business Performance

It is generally felt that company communications should try to engage the interest of employees and encourage their participation. But the investment of time, effort and money in employee communications ought also to be regarded like any other investment - namely it ought to contribute measurably to the performance and efficiency of the business, otherwise why do it? We would expect any new telephone system or new computer system to make a direct contribution to the performance and efficiency of the business, and so it should be also with any employee communications system.

That is why communications to employees need primarily to be about things which will improve the performance of the business, i.e. product quality, customer service, productivity, costs, efficiency, on-time delivery, meeting schedules, profitability, etc. etc. And the communication needs to be expressed in a way employees can understand, and to be about subjects which affect them, or on which they can take action. If your communications are not about these things then they will not be seen as a priority either by the managers or the employees.

As a result, when the pressure is on, the real business priorities will take precedence, communications will fall to the bottom of the pile and will get done "when the manager has time". Similarly if the communications are not about something which really interests employees, or about a subject they can do something about, they won't mind if communications meetings simply don't get held.

A large manufacturing company producing components for the motor and aero industries, whose communications were in need of major re-vamp, decided to harness their system to focus specifically on performance improvement across the business, and on changing the company's style of operation. First, their executive team got down to the job of defining their key company goals in such a way that they would be

- (a) simple and understandable to all employees,
- (b) relatively constant over the following five years or so, and
- (c) something every department and employee could do something about every working day.

After much debate and consideration of many alternatives they chose the two following goals :

- competing through superior customer service
- continuously improving business performance.

These might have remained as mere trite statements but for how the company chose to communicate them and to turn them into practical realities throughout the business.

They gave each member of their executive team a pre-think document and asked them to consider what practical things they were each going to do to make these goals a reality. They then held a two-day off-site conference, where each department head agreed with his colleagues what their departments were each going to contribute specifically to the company's goals, and how they were going to measure and communicate their progress. The same team meeting process then cascaded down through the business right to shop floor level. Each working team took two days out to put their own practical programme together which was then presented to their team manager's boss for approval and support.

And things soon began to happen. To see whether they actually were superior in customer service, competitors' products were brought in to make direct detailed comparisons. The company also sent operators to work on their customers' production lines to find out how their products were actually being used and installed. That led to some immediate and enthusiastic changes and

improvements. Their customers began to see that the company's goals actually meant something in practice.

The working teams around the business had also used their two-day off-site sessions to set themselves some performance improvement targets, and soon graphs and charts began to appear showing how each group was doing against its chosen objectives i.e. demonstrating their contribution to the company goal of continuously improving business performance.

With simple goals like these and a process of this kind, communications in a business take on a coherence and a purpose you cannot get where communications are undertaken simply as a matter of faith, or 'because they are a good thing'. Communications only become meaningful and understandable to employees when they hang from a clear overall purpose. That is a fundamentally important point. Without such a purpose communications simply appear to be a confusing collection of random information.

Make Your Communication Messages Clear and Consistent

Messages about the company's values and beliefs need to be repeated and followed through if employees are to take them on board, and live them in their everyday work. Advertisers can certainly teach us a few things when it comes to getting messages across. Generally their messages are simple, clear and consistently repeated. When Heineken has told us this week that their beer 'reaches parts other beers cannot reach', they don't suddenly switch to a different message next week just in case we get bored. No, they repeat the same message constantly until we all know it by heart. And that is precisely what needs to be done in business if your messages are to get through to employees, and actually become part of your company's culture.

The companies which use communications best are very clear about their messages. And these are no mere empty slogans. Rather they are the principles the company actually lives by, they are statements which characterise the company's fundamental philosophy and which they carry through in their everyday operations. IBM is a good case in point. They have had their troubles over the years, but their business philosophy is based on a set of 'beliefs' that they have professed and communicated about for decades. They are :

- (a) Respect for the individual
- (b) To give the best customer service of any company in the world, and
- (c) To pursue all tasks with the idea that they can be accomplished in a superior way.

These are the beliefs that keep the company working their way through difficulties and recessions to remain one of the most admired companies in the world.

At the same time, however, there are several key messages which the company's employee communications are constantly emphasising :

- IBM knows where it is going
- IBM is a good place to work
- IBM makes a significant contribution to the community
- Technology is both necessary and exciting.

And of course they have abundant evidence to illustrate and support these messages. Indeed, if some of these message bells have not been rung for some time, the company's communications media will deliberately carry articles and items to keep the messages fresh in employees' minds. That way, their communications have consistency and coherence.

But like all good messages they have very much a two-sided effect. On the one hand they influence employee opinion in constructive directions, but they also constantly press the company into positive actions which will give substance to its own messages. The company has to show it knows where it is going, it obviously has to be a good place to work, and so on. Otherwise employees see communications on these subjects as just so much hot air. Your messages will have next to no effect if your actions do not match and follow through.

Make Your First-line Managers into the Company's Principal Two-way Communicators

MORI, the pollsters, conduct many company employee attitude surveys. Often in these surveys they ask employees where they actually get their information from, and where they prefer to get their information. Usually a variety of media is listed and respondents are asked to nominate their top five in order. When they combine employees' top three choices this is typically what they find. (This example is from a 2,000 employee survey).

Sources from Which Employees Prefer to Receive Information

My immediate manager	85%
Team meetings	59%
Notice boards	35%
Printed material sent to me	29%

My manager's manager	29%
Direct from senior management	15%
From Personnel	15%
Trade Union representative	7%
Audio-visual presentation	6%
House magazine	4%
The 'grapevine'	4%

Consistently employees vote overwhelmingly in favour of their immediate manager as the communicator they prefer. But is it any wonder? He is the person employees see every day and who understands their practical problems first-hand. When he does communicate face-to-face you can ask him questions in your own words i.e. the communication is two-way and at the employee's own level. He is not impersonal like a notice board, a video or a magazine. He talks their language. He is the person who talks to them more than anybody else in the business. He is their natural choice.

But first-line managers cannot simply be given the prime responsibility for communications and then left to sink or swim. If the process is to be done well, they need strong and continuing support. First, in the preparation of useful and pertinent material pitched at the level of the employees' understanding. Second, in the form of thorough training, retraining, and on-the-job coaching until they can perform their communications role with confidence and conviction.

In fact, without this kind of support managers may well be acting to nullify the very messages their company wants to convey. Consider this point. Most formal company communication systems operate on a once monthly basis. But, whether we like it or not, the manager is communicating with employees every minute of the day by what he says and does. If communications meetings take roughly half a day a month (we are being generous) and there are around 23 working days in the average month, then what the manager does every day has a 46 to 1 chance of convincing employees that that is what the company is really like. If what he does is in conflict with company messages, his daily actions will swamp anything the company says formally only once a month.

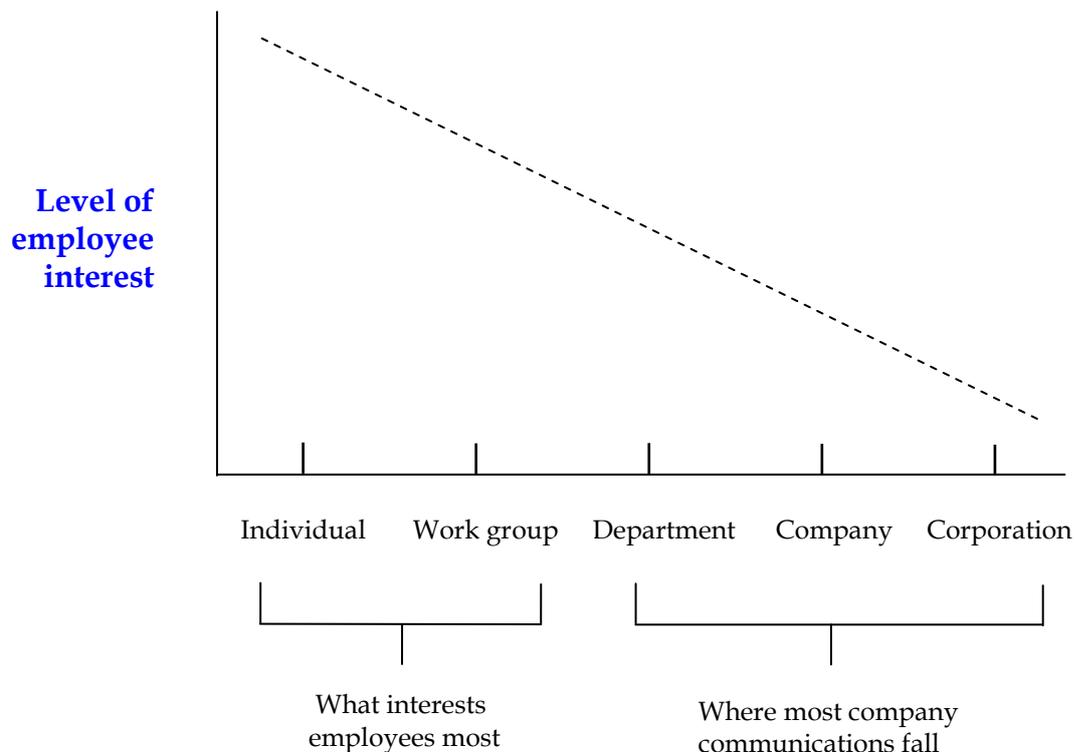
In the end there is really no viable alternative but to use the communications source employees clearly prefer - the front-line manager. That is also why company messages must not only be few and simple enough for the manager to carry around in his head, they need to be actionable enough for him to be living them in his everyday work. He is the face of the company they see every day. To most employees he is the company. If he is not speaking and acting in line with the company's declared philosophy every day, then they presume the mission

statements and pontifications from the top are simply so many fine words and window dressing. If he does not act them out, they won't either.

Communicate at the Level of Your Employees' Understanding and Interest

Another key factor in successful communication is to talk at the level of employees' understanding and interest. The interest graph below makes what may seem a simple point but it is crucially important. Indeed, many companies offend the point regularly by communicating information largely at the right end of the graph!

The more the information does not affect the hearers personally the more eyes glaze over and attention wanders. If it's about pay, the new bonus scheme, or about changes to the job then they're listening. But words about the new office opened in Brazil or the return on equity in the Chairman's latest report to the City just leaves them cold. The more company communications are about such subjects the more employees find excuses not to turn up, and the more the manager is grateful to have business pressure as an excuse for skipping meetings.



One multi-national company in the UK, however, does get attention from all its employees on how the company is doing as a whole. That's because everyone's pay and bonuses are dependent upon it!

The company publishes its sales and profit plan for the year to all employees in the form of a large graph which is prominently displayed at each plant. As each month goes by the actual sales and profit performance are plotted on the graph. When sales hit predetermined trigger levels, and providing profitability is above a certain minimum figure, every employee - from shop floor to managing director - gets an increase in pay and a lump sum bonus. Naturally everyone gets very interested in how sales are going, they want to know about the latest products and what the competition is doing, and they are keen to do whatever will help the company succeed. That's one obvious way of making sure everyone takes an interest in the progress of the company.

But employees are also interested in the thing that affects them most every day, and that's the job they do. If employees spend eight hours locked into their job every day they are keen to know about things that will make the job easier, that will help them avoid problems, and turn out better service or a better product.

This is where the Japanese in particular have stolen a real trick in many of their manufacturing companies. They know that the time span of shop floor employees' attention is relatively short. They also know that these employees have more to do with high product quality and productivity than anyone else in the company. So by far the most of their communications is about the product itself and its quality. Their communications are not an optional add-on which happen once a month - they happen for the first few minutes every day before the start of each shift.

That has several positive advantages. It has to be about the job - that's all you can get in in that short time. It also makes for regular interaction of the manager with his people and keeps employees fully up-to-date with changes that may have happened in the last twenty-four hours (and there's always something has happened to change things). The daily get-together where they regularly sort out problems together also begins to make the group feel success as a team. And you cannot really get the same feeling when you meet just once a month. It's a habit well worth adopting.

Make the Upward Communications Channel as Strong as the Downward

Most company communications systems are strong on the downward channel but peculiarly weak on the upward channel. They tell much better than they listen. The popularity of Briefing Groups or their like have also tended to reinforce the idea that communications is about taking the messages down the organisation, about telling the troops what is happening. But if you want employees to participate actively there has to be a strong listening channel too, where the big boss actually hears what is being said on the front line and is seen to do so.

To give employees the opportunity to talk directly to executives at the top of the house, Scottish and Newcastle brewery introduced a get-together called The Chairman's Forum. Forty employees drawn from all levels in the organisation and including trade union representatives were invited twice yearly to meet with the Chairman. On the basis that no negotiating took place and that confidential information would be respected, the Chairman gave details on current problems and performance in the business, and on company plans for the future.

Any issue could be raised, and since the Chairman undertook to give straight answers to any question and not to withhold any information, often participants found themselves discussing things even shareholders or investment analysts were not aware of. But the record is that confidences have been respected, and those taking part (different each time) act as opinion-formers throughout the business, and have succeeded in gaining wider acceptance of the need to drop restrictive practices and streamline operations.

Employees always have ideas and positive suggestions to make about their work and their company if they are asked - and that's another good reason to make the upward communications channel easy to use. Allied Irish Bank introduced a company-wide Marketing Action Programme to galvanise the whole organisation into a more market-oriented stance where superior customer service became a prime goal. To engage everyone in the company programme and to get positive contributions from all their employees they introduced a staff suggestion scheme called Super Thought.

Staff were encouraged in each unit and branch to get together in voluntary groups to come up with positive suggestions for change and improvement where they could win special gifts and have the chance of taking part in a raffle for a car. In the four months of Super Thought some 1200 teams submitted around 11,000 suggestions. The net result was that staff became very much aware of the seriousness of the bank's new orientation, and the bank got the benefit of a host of new ideas by making the exercise exciting, and by making the upward communication channel so much easier to use.

Listen to What Your Employees Tell You

Most communications systems will soon fall into disrepute with employees unless you show you are actually listening to what they say. The point came home very much to a manager who recently joined a large UK conglomerate making products for the car industry. Having been appointed General Manager of several manufacturing units, his boss proudly told him of a new communications system one of the units had recently introduced and suggested it ought to be extended elsewhere.

He duly visited the plant to find out more. During his visit he was collared by the plant shop steward who said: "Are you the new General Manager? You're the very person we want to see. We'd like to talk to you about a few things." Since there were only about seventy people on the site, he decided to call everyone into the cafeteria for a short meeting. And did they bum his ears!

They proceeded to tell him all the things that were wrong in the plant and how nothing appeared to be getting done about it. First, there was nowhere to park when they came for work - the small area set aside soon filled up in the morning, and many employees were having to scramble around the local streets finding spaces to get into work. Second, the toilets were in a disgraceful state, with cracked windows, cracked toilets, doors hanging off, etc. Third, they were all being "gassed" by the fumes from the process they were using. And so it went on. The new manager promised to investigate and take action on each of the points they raised.

Later, when he asked the plant manager why these things had not come up in his new communications meetings, he said they had. Why had he not done anything about them? He replied : "You mustn't react to everything they say, otherwise you would never be finished. I use the communications meetings to them have a good moan and let off steam". What about the fumes? "To tell you the truth," said the manager, I do go home with a sore throat myself most evenings"!

Now this may be an extreme example, but many employees all over the country feel to a greater or lesser degree that they cannot get things done through their communications system. As a result they switch off and management then wonders why employees do not respond when they want their help. You can have what looks like a wonderful system on paper - the meetings are held regularly, minutes are produced, etc. etc. - but if you don't show you are listening by taking action on what you hear, then the process may be nothing but an elaborate waste of time.

One UK manufacturing company not only listens to what its people say, it judges its managers on their employees' opinions! Every two years they conduct an attitude survey -a means of ensuring employees' views are heard anonymously and in confidence. Embedded in the survey are eight questions about how employees think they are being managed. Simple but important questions like : "I am clear about what my manager expects from me in my job"; "My manager listens and does something about the problems I raise"; "I get credit from my manager when I do a good job"; "I can talk over problems with my manager"; and "I get fair treatment from my manager".

When the results are published each manager has his rating shown as his "managership index", which is the average of his scores on the relevant eight questions. Having set themselves managership objectives, and knowing they are

having their performance measured, managers get very interested not only in what their employees say in the survey, but what they say all the year round. And it raises by a quantum leap first-line managers' interest in ongoing good management and continuous good communication.

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Communications are not something you can confine to 'communications meetings' once a month, or to house journals or notice boards. Admit or not, communications of one kind or another are going on in business every minute of the day. It is not something you can separate out and give to someone in Personnel. It is like breathing - the life of the company simply does not go on without it. And if management actions are not in line with their communication messages, a formal overlay of communications meetings will have little effect on employee behaviour, or on their commitment to the business.

So, is your company clear about its key messages? Are your first-line managers the principal (trained) two-way communicators in your business? Do you demonstrate by your actions that you listen to what your employees say? You will never get your communications act together until you do.

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