Failing to flourish

Kerry Bellamy examines the impact of failing to communicate on the whole organisation

At the centre of every successful relationship is communication; we hear this in our personal lives all the time. Yet, when it comes to our professional relationships, communication often receives the worst press. Employees often cite it as the one thing they would look to change in their organisations.

So why, despite the millions of emails, tweets, status updates and text messages sent every day, are we still falling short in the communication stakes? And, in truth, is it our fault or is it that our employees, peers and managers are simply not listening? After all, we did our bit and sent the message, didn't we?

What is this mythical thing we call 'communication' and how can we hope to see it more often? Perhaps more importantly, what is the impact/cost of failing to communicate effectively across our organisations?

As a learning developer or HR manager, you are probably well versed in the theory of communication, that it is a process requiring a message to be conceived, packaged, sent, received and understood by the recipient. It seems simple and straightforward: I have something to share, I decide how to do this (eg email), I send it and it is received. That's it done, process complete.

But in the bustle of working life, we often forget the all-important *actual* final step of the communication process, that the message requires an action by the recipient. Whether that action is something physical, such as accepting a meeting invitation, or cognitive, such as understanding the finer nuances of the new strategic plan, there was an intended purpose to the communication when it was sent.

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References

1 Baldoni J "Five Ways to sharpen your communication skills" *Harvard Business Review* (April 2009) http://bit.ly/1mdbQn72

2 Groysberg B, Slind M "The Silent Killer of Big Companies" *Harvard Business Review* (October 2012) http://bit.ly/Oo62cc

3 Groysberg B, Slind M "Before you start talking, think" *Harvard Business Review* (July 2012) http://bit.ly/OvOxXj

Here we find a fundamental flaw in the process and our most regular failing in effective communication: *our misplaced belief that an action has actually taken place.*

In business, as in life, communication underpins the successful achievement of our goals and objectives. Indeed it is "the glue that holds organisations together"[1]. A two-way process that informs our vision and mission, stakeholder needs, financial stability and structural change. Yet we fail to have a full understanding or effective grasp on the process that has been referred to as "the silent killer of organisations"[2].

Top-down communication

Consider firstly the top-down approach. This *downward communication* from executive to employee is most often transactional in design. Sometimes referred to colloquially as 'decrees from on high' or 'state of the nation' messages due to their one-directional tone, these messages are most likely to be updates or bulletins designed to share or highlight key aspects of the business direction at the time of sending.

But let's spare a moment to consider their effectiveness. Do our employees have a good understanding of our business and organisational direction based on their engagement with these downward communications? The information is certainly gathered, packaged, sent and, for the most part, we can be fairly confident that it is physically received, especially if it is sent via email, although a trend for posting these messages on intranet bulletin boards provides us with less certainty of receipt. Yet studies have shown that, when questioned, senior leaders reported that as many as 68 per cent of their employees were unlikely to understand or be able to discuss their business's 'big-picture strategy'[3].

So, despite spending time carefully crafting and issuing these messages, we find that a significant number of employees fail to either understand or connect with the content in a meaningful way. This disconnect could manifest itself as disengagement, which, in turn, could have an impact on the motivation, productivity and retention of staff across the business. All of this has an unfavourable impact on resource management and achieving overarching business objectives. "If your employees aren't sure about where you stand, or about where your company is heading, their uncertainty will hinder their ability to help move the company forward"[4].

Bottom-up communication

Employees often have the opportunity to respond to, or engage with, management most often via

upward communication channels, which tend to be formally structured and often require careful or lengthy navigation, especially in larger organisations.

In theory, team meetings, surveys, annual reviews and one-to-one discussions all provide opportunities for employees to engage and communicate with their line managers. However, in practice, these opportunities for effective interactions have a tendency to be less rewarding experiences, highlighting misaligned priorities and creating a disconnection or barrier between the employee and line manager.

As our society evolves, so, too, do our employees. Their perspective of the world is changing and their belief in what they want or are capable of achieving is shifting too. A failure to appreciate their changing perspectives could result in missed opportunities for enhancement, while a misalignment or misunderstanding of priorities can cause the workforce to make assumptions about perceived expectations that could have a negative impact on performance.

Not communicating effectively, failing to take an active interest and/or invite a dialogue with your employees could be costing your business in terms of resource, manpower and customer advantage.

Side-to-side communication

Already we can see the potential minefield that is vertical communication structures but as we know communication does not remain vertical and formal, instead it exists on all levels and in all directions. Consider the mix of individuals, teams and departments engaging with each other through *horizontal communication* channels as they work together as peers on projects and service delivery.

Here there is ample opportunity for misinterpreting or misrepresenting messages, as well as a political hotbed of internal scrutiny focused on the equality of resources and performance management between teams. Peers reflect keenly on messages given and demands made of their teams. Comparisons are quickly made between their allocations and the management style of other, similar teams. If information is believed to be conflicting or the actions taken by management unfair, we again find ourselves with a disengaged or despondent workforce who question management's intentions and no longer trust their leaders.

Finally, just when you thought you had a hold on this new and challenging world of intrigue, the informal and highly effective *grapevine* is fully operational, cutting across all organisational structures and functioning through a socially

constructed network of contacts. With few, if any, controls possible from an organisational perspective, the grapevine feeds off rumour, insecurities and common assumptions. There is, however, good news here: it is a powerful force for organisational culture. If we get the culture right, it will be mirrored in the grapevine and serve to reinforce and embed cultural change or organisational identity.

It's no surprise that, suddenly, the idea of managing this mess can seem overwhelming but regardless we must quickly realise the importance of how communication channels operate throughout the organisation. As managers, we are responsible for the co-ordination of communications to facilitate effective goal achievement; we are also presented with the enormous task of managing this ever-growing and evolving network of formal and informal communication. At every turn we are faced with a multitude of variables that can, if not addressed appropriately, present a significant and negative impact on the operational and strategic performance of our business, both inside and out.

Indeed, companies such as Nokia, Enron, Star Princess Cruise Lines and BP have all cited a failure in communications as a key component of some of their biggest corporate downfalls.

So what can we do to ensure we are not next on the hit list?

Making communication effective

Many of our managers already know and understand the importance of good financial management for business success and most of them, if we have blown the staff development trumpet loud enough, can appreciate the business benefits of good people management. However, few realise the risks of failing at effective communication nor the benefits that can be gained from managing its flow through the organisation. This is where our role as learning developers, training managers and HR directors comes to the foreground: it is our responsibility to *actively engage in communication systems* that promote dialogue not monologue, strengthen rather than

Communication underpins the successful achievement of our goals and objectives

4 ibid

5 Groysberg B, Slind M *Talk Inc: How trusted leaders use conversation to power their organisations* Harvard Business School Publishing (2012)

6 Simon H *A Theories of Bounded Rationality* North-Holland Publishing Company (1972)

We are seeking to ensure that the message sent is the message received, as it was intended

strain relationships with employees and work to maintain a clear and authentic agenda that is aligned with the organisational strategy. This will bring our businesses into an age in which we are no longer at the mercy of ineffective, finger-in-the-wind-style communications[5] and, instead, are able to embark on an organisational conversation that ensures employees are talking *with*, rather than to, each other.

In adopting this approach throughout all levels of the business, we are able to bring our team and departmental agendas to the forefront and open them up for discussion. The brave amongst us will even *invite feedback and encourage sharing of critical content and proposed actions.* In doing so, we open up the possibility of engaging our workforce on a deeper level, enhancing our business practice through transformational collaboration and developing our processes informed by 'up-to-the-minute' operational intelligence.

We need to develop our leaders by challenging them to reconsider their approach to communicating the strategic direction of the business. Encourage them to move from a position of declaration to one of explanation. Ask them to consider their employees' priorities in conjunction with their own objectives, to consider the differences between perspectives and question how they can better align their goals to those of their workforce. As people understand the reasoning behind proposed actions and, importantly, how the actions are relevant to them, they are better able to make decisions and engage with ideas that will take the business forward. Let us throw off the shackles of organisational silence and bounded rationality[6] and incite employee participation as the new direction.

Let us support our leaders in fully engaging with their employees on a new, deeper level. Show them that, by adopting a new approach that enhances trust and respect, they will see a change in employee motivation and engagement. By embracing a *coaching style of communication* with our teams, we are able to better understand and appreciate the individuality of each member, learn what motivates and inspires them, and have a superior appreciation for the knowledge and skills they bring with them. Taking an interest in people and, perhaps more bravely, sharing a little of ourselves too serves to encourage authentic communication and enhance trust within teams.

If we were to repeat this throughout the organisation, adopting this style across every team, department and level, we could establish an enhanced level of engagement and understanding that brings with it new levels of operational intelligence, as well as a sense of shared purpose. This knowledge of operational constraints and employee motivations offers our business an additional, person-centred approach to succession planning, retention, recruitment and resource allocation that perhaps did not exist previously.

We should also consider the often-misquoted work of Albert Mehrabian, in which he studied the relationship weighting between the non-verbal and the verbal components of communication, offering us the 7%-38%-55% rule. His work suggested that the words used in a message are the least likely to be relied upon when the accompanying tone or body language is at odds with them. However, in business, we often forget this and instead feel that the positive messages we send will outweigh the less desirable actions taken on the ground. In reality the opposite is true: our employees will believe their eyes, not their ears.

For example if a business going through a merger claims, through its official communications, to be working towards a mutually-beneficial blending of cultures and processes yet, when observing the actions and decisions taken, employees see that one side of the partnership appears to be favoured over the other, the message received is interpreted by its recipients as untrustworthy. The action observed outweighs the words, and the grapevine quickly springs into action, gaining power and momentum and calling into question all other corporate communication along the way.

In order to manage this situation effectively, we need to *encourage our leaders to be truthful, authentic and congruent* in all their communications and actions. Surely it is wiser to weather the initial disgruntlement of an informed and involved workforce than to spend months and, in some cases, millions of pounds attempting to dispel rumours and rebuild trust? No business has unlimited resources, so why pour what we do have into activity that continues to undo our efforts? Rip off the 'Band-Aid' of the old ways and feel the sting of authenticity; let honesty rush through your business; feel how this open approach offers your organisation a new lease of life.

From the moment our employees join the organisation, they need to *feel part of our big-picture strategy*, know where we are heading and how they can contribute in a meaningful way at all levels of the business. For our businesses to move forward with strength and cohesion, we need to embrace and manage our communication channels, to explain them and their significance to all new and existing employees, regardless of level. As HR managers and learning developers we are able to influence this through the recruitment and induction processes by incorporating development sessions into the agenda that seek to flush out misconceptions of corporate communication and open a dialogue between employees and leaders, so that they may grow and learn together for the good of the business.

The road may be long and bumpy. Along the way, we may encounter resistance to change or fear of the unknown. All manner of barriers will be constructed, such as claims of a lack of resources, increased

workload and old-school thinking, to block the move towards open corporate conversation as a mode for effective communication. But when we break it down and look at what is involved, it is simply that we are calling for the final step of the communication process to be completed. We are seeking to ensure that the message sent is the message received, as it was intended, not clouded by lack of understanding or misinterpretation but clear, considered and congruent.

By failing to complete the process, we risk setting our business and ourselves up to fail. However, by actively engaging with our employees, checking understanding, inviting collaborative discussions and sharing our successes, we take big steps towards taming the communication beast and stand a chance of rising from the ashes, victorious. **TJ**

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