

# Communicate Effectively



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| Mission. The big picture.<br>Still important today.          | The mission is missin'.<br>Develop your team<br>mission. | The power of why.<br>What people want to<br>know.            |
| The mushroom<br>syndrome.<br>Keep them in the dark<br>and... | What we have here is a<br>failure to communicate.        | Curiosity killed the cat.<br>Information brought it<br>back. |
| The lights are on, but<br>nobody's home.                     | Golf, painting, listening,<br>composing.                 | Engage your mind before<br>your mouth.                       |



## Mission - The big picture

The individual in the large organization..... Like the uncalculating animals, is also a defenseless creature who calculatingly practices deception for safety's sake against the invisible threats around him.

Melville Dalton, American Sociologist, *Men Who Manage* (Wiley, 1959)

**C**hief executives and senior management are expected to understand the 'big picture'. Why not give all employees a better understanding of the big picture?

The act of informing is nearly as important as the information itself. It sends a very clear and positive message to people in terms of how they are viewed by management. At the very least, they will better understand the rationale behind some of the decisions made by senior management which they have to put into action in the workplace.

Managers interested in informing their staff about the big picture can discuss the answers to some or all of these questions, as relevant, with staff. You can conduct this session by providing this information yourself or you can – possibly – surprise you and them by letting them reflect on these questions and respond to them themselves. Then, if needs be, you can inform their opinions.

- ☐ What is our core business?
- ☐ Who are our major customers or users? What are our main markets, outlets or distribution channels?
- ☐ What are our main products or services?
- ☐ How has our business changed from what it was yesterday? How has the environment in which we operate changed or how is it likely to change in the near future? What should be different about our business in the future?
- ☐ What are our main economic concerns? What are our critical costs? What are the key drivers of our critical costs? What are our profit margins? What are the main external and internal threats to our economic well-being?
- ☐ Where does our main income and capital come from?
- ☐ What things are important to our organisation in relation to our image, leadership in industry, the community, the environment, marketing, equal opportunity, innovation, risk-taking, quality, management style, culture, etc.



- ❑ What special considerations do we have in relation to owners or shareholders, parent organisation, employees, customers, suppliers, the general public, unions, legislation, government?
- ❑ What are the operating beliefs that drive the way we conduct our business?

The ideal way to communicate this information is to hold short briefing sessions with small groups of staff. The answers to these questions should be confined to no more than two to three pages in total and distributed to staff at the session. The main purpose of the briefing session is to allow discussion of this information. People should be encouraged to ask questions.

Most people respond positively when they see that the organisation makes serious and effective efforts to keep them informed.





## The Mission is missin'

What makes life dreary is the want of a motive.  
George Eliot, 1819-1880, English novelist, essayist, and editor  
Daniel Deronda

Where there is no vision, the people perish.  
Old testament, proverbs 29:18

Ready! Fire! Aim!  
Anonymous.

**How inspiring is your company vision or mission statement? What impact does it have on the engagement, commitment and desire to excel of employees in the workplace?**

Too many vision statements are a waste of time and money. Employees ignore them, deride them and are certainly unmoved by them.

In the worst case, senior management have a weekend away at a luxury resort and come up with a statement of meaningless clichés which are about as compelling as boiled tripe. These are then printed and framed and displayed for the benefit of staff and customers alike. As soon as they go up, people grow a foot taller and productivity takes off like a rocket. You wish.

How much impact do these commonly used mission statements really have on employees in the workplace?

'To achieve world's best practice.' 'To achieve excellence in customer service.' 'To be the provider of choice'. Et al.

Vision and mission statements are meant to galvanise people, to focus energy, to give meaning and purpose, to inspire and motivate, to make people want to contribute. In most cases, the only people who attach any value to the vision and mission statements are the people who came up with them and their attachment is usually fairly short lived.

It is important for senior management to come up with and communicate the grand vision but that's only half the battle. The other half is making it meaningful and compelling to employees at all levels.

Why not let teams or work groups come up with their own mission statement and guiding principles for their work area? They can start with the grand mission and



guiding principles for the whole organisation and make it meaningful and compelling to them at their level in their words.

Set up a meeting with your people and take them through this process. (Or use an expert facilitator). Remember to keep it simple.

## Team Mission

- Agree the purpose of our team - a statement of the principle activity of our team, why the team exists, what differentiates our team from other teams, what unique value we add to the organization.

## Values

- Agree what our team stands for and what we believe in - for example - trust, mutual support, creativity and innovation, balanced expression, equality, fairness, co-operation, development, improvement, etc.

## Guiding Principles

- These guide our relationships with our customers and with ourselves. They describe the standards or rules of personal conduct. For example: The key is leadership and leaders are the key. Every customer is our advocate.

## Key Performance Indicators

- These specify the 2 to 3 activities or actions which will demonstrate that we are applying each guiding principle.

Create a layout so that you can document these statements on to one page and review them regularly with your work group.



## The Power Of Why

**W**hy is this happening? Why are they doing this? Why are we doing this? What's their rationale? What's their motive? What's their reason? These questions are often asked by staff about management policies, initiatives and actions.

Never underestimate the power of *why*. It will pay managers well to spend time and effort in giving people the context. The context – which can incorporate the big picture, the background, the rationale, the reasons, the broader view, the motives, the purpose, the changing circumstances, the needs, the contributing factors, the underlying forces, the connections between the parts, new threats and new opportunities, etc. – gives meaning to things.

Whether it be a new project, a new initiative, a change to systems and procedures, a directive, a new task, a new policy, a shift in focus, a change in plan, a new work practice – giving people the context is a powerful management action.

Some people say that staff aren't interested, they don't want to know, they don't care. That's true – for some. But the majority of staff do appreciate it when they are given the context. And there is another important reason to do this. You can bet your sweet object for sitting on that the very staff who say they don't care will be the first to whinge and berate management when it doesn't happen. So do it anyway. For those who say they don't care, nothing changes – you don't lose, you break even. For those who do care – the majority of thinking people – you win.

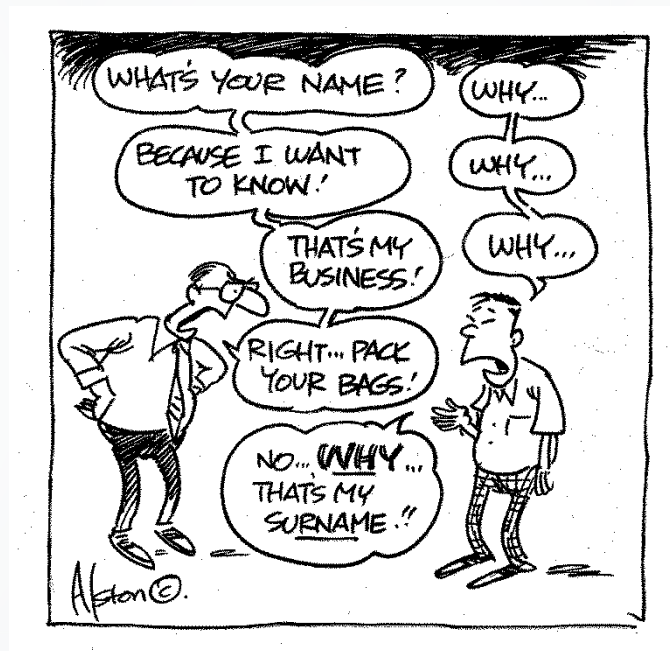
Be truthful – the truth may hurt, but it does less damage than lies and deceit. And anyway, staff always speculate and form their own suspicions in the absence of truthful information.

To give people the context, discuss and provide people with information and/or perspectives about the following where relevant:

- What things are happening external to the organisation which are creating this need?
- How have circumstances changed which necessitate this new policy or initiative?
- What are the less than obvious issues at play here?
- What will happen if we don't make this change?
- What are the underlying forces that are driving this situation or change?
- How does the new project or task fit into the bigger picture?
- What is the rationale behind this decision?
- How are other parts of the organisation affected if we don't do this?
- What new information has come to light or what different perspectives relate to this change or decision?



- Why is this important?
- What is the reasoning and/or research behind this policy change?
- What are the perceived opportunities or threats that we are responding to?
- What are the wider ramifications on all stakeholders if we do or don't do this?
- What things have happened in the past that have lead us to this place?
- How does this new way of doing things impact directly and indirectly on other people in the organisation?
- What needs and/or wants will this new action meet?
- Where has the push for this change come from?
- Why is it important to do things differently?
- What are the operating beliefs and meanings here (for all parties)?
- What could be other beliefs and meanings that could serve us all better?







## The Mushroom Syndrome

**T**he 'mushroom syndrome' - keep them in the dark and feed them bullshit - appears to be alive and flourishing. Talk to employees down the line and they still tell you that they get insufficient information about what's going on. It's often too little, too late, inaccurate, poorly considered or not at all.

Some managers argue that communicating some things to employees would be counter-productive. Maybe. But look at the impact on morale, trust, co-operation and performance when organisations deal dishonestly with unpleasant information.

Communication is the life-blood of an organisation. In the absence of effective communication, workers will form their own opinions about many of the issues which affect their motivation and work performance. Unfortunately, this usually results in rumours, half-truths, distortions, misinterpretations, uninformed perceptions and a general lack of understanding.

The root cause of many workplace problems is the different perceptions held by the various stakeholders.

The quotation, "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive" (Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*, 1808) and the old saying "honesty is the best policy" are certainly relevant in the workplace.

**WHAT TO COMMUNICATE? Here are some issues about which people want information:**

- ☐ The purpose and strategy of the team or work group to which they belong.
- ☐ The hard and soft, key performance indicators which inform them about the progress and outcomes of their work group.
- ☐ How the outcomes of their work group impact on the 'big picture'.
- ☐ Why we do things the way we do at all levels within the organisation.
- ☐ What impact their work performance has on both internal and external customers.
- ☐ How other areas of the organisation use the services or information provided by our area.
- ☐ The reasons behind existing policies and procedures which appear to the worker to be obsolete, inefficient or unnecessary.
- ☐ The reasons behind changes to policies and procedures.
- ☐ What things they do well and what things they do poorly or not so well.
- ☐ What the future looks like for the organisation and for the individual.
- ☐ What management are doing about their problems.
- ☐ The reasons why management aren't doing anything about their problems.





- ☐ What things are happening which could affect their job security.
- ☐ The rationale behind policy decisions.
- ☐ How the organisation as a whole is performing.
- ☐ What opportunities exist to develop new skills or to seek advancement.
- ☐ What help is available to assist them to deal with personal problems which invariably affect on-the-job performance
- ☐ What internal and external customers think of the products or services they are supplying.
- ☐ By what criteria their work performance is being judged.
- ☐ Future changes which are likely to affect how they do their work.
- ☐ What action management has taken to implement suggestions to improve systems and procedures.
- ☐ The rationale behind management's rejection or lack of action regarding suggestions to improve things.





## What We Have Here Is A Failure To Communicate

No talent in management is worth more than the ability to master facts - not just any facts, but the ones that provide the best answers. Mastery thus involves knowing what facts you want; where to dig for them; how to dig; how to process the mined ore; and how to use the precious nuggets of information that are finally in your hand. The process can be laborious - which is why it is so often botched.

Robert Heller, Editor, Management Today.

**Do a root cause analysis of many work problems** and chances are that somewhere you will find a breakdown in communications. The most important skill a manager can develop (with the possible exception of political savvy) is the art of communication. As subsets of the larger organisation, teams or work groups thrive on a constant diet of good communications.

### Here are examples of things you can do to improve communications:

- Identify the nature, the best format and the timing of the communication requirements of the team.
- Ask (without blame or repercussions) where, when, how, what, why and with whom communication is breaking down.
- Identify individual requirements for essential information.
- Consult with other areas to agree your and their communication requirements and implement and monitor actions to achieve them.
- Ask team members for ways to improve communication within the team and with other teams.
- Hold regular communication sessions to allow two-way feedback on any issues important to the team.
- Ask staff to tell you the issues on which they need more information.
- Discuss issues or changes with the team as soon as you are aware of them.
- Agree with the next level of management the communication requirements of your team.
- Provide (at least) monthly updates on team and organisation performance.
- Identify existing policies and procedures which cause poor communications.
- Seek clarification from team members to check their level of understanding and commitment.
- After team discussions always document what actions, by whom, by when, etc. will happen as a result of the discussion.
- In discussions with team members, separate facts from opinions. Ask people if what they say is based on fact or assumption or opinion.



- As rumours become known to you, discuss the facts behind the rumour with the team.
- Seek information from higher management on anything unclear to you and the team.
- Consult with team members about decisions which will affect them before the decision is made.
- When unpopular directives have to be communicated to the team, explain the rationale as best you can, your position, your feelings about the directive, why you will support it, your expectations and let the team members express their feelings.
- In team meetings, use visual aids to reinforce the important messages you seek to convey.
- Regularly review how well we communicate as a team.
- Ask what you could do more of or less of to improve communications within the team and with other parts of the organisation.





## Curiosity Killed the Cat, Information Brought It Back

The information most useful to me ...comes from quick, and often casual verbal exchanges. This usually reaches a manager much faster than anything written down. And usually the more timely the information is, the more valuable it is.

Andrew Grove

Chief Executive Officer, Intel Corp, High Output Management (Random House, 1983)

An individual without information cannot take responsibility; an individual who is given information cannot help but take responsibility.

Jan Carlzon

Chief Executive Officer, SAS (Sweden), Moments of Truth  
(Ballinger, 1987)

If you don't give people information, they'll make up something to fill the void.

Carla O'Dell

President, O'Dell and Associates, CFO, October, 1987.

**This is the information age. Be informed or perish. You, your team members, your manager and other internal customers of your team need information. Information is the lifeblood of the organisation. This information needs to be sufficient, accurate, timely and relevant.**

You can use the following 'Workplace Information Analysis' to check that your team has the information it requires to perform to its optimum level. In looking at your team's requirements for information, you will be asked to identify or assess:

- The **ESSENTIAL (E)** and **DESIRABLE (D)** information which your team members need to successfully perform all their jobs.
- The **FREQUENCY** of their information requirements - daily, weekly, monthly.
- The **FORMAT** in which that information is required.
- **FROM WHOM** the information is required and **FOR WHOM** the information is required.
- The **SUFFICIENCY** of the information being provided from Low 1 2 3 4 5 High
- The **TIMELINESS** of the information being provided from Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Good
- The **ACCURACY** of the information being provided from Low 1 2 3 4 5 High.

Do this analysis in consultation with your team to identify ways to improve the quantity and quality of information flow to your team. You can follow the same

## Workplace Information Analysis - Information Requirements for Staff



## The Lights Are On, But Nobody's Home

To be able to really listen, one should abandon or put aside all prejudices...When you are in a receptive state of mind, things can be easily understood...But, unfortunately, most of us listen through a screen of resistance. We are screened with prejudices, whether religious or spiritual, psychological or scientific; or, with daily worries, desires, and fears. And with these fears for a screen, we listen. Therefore we listen really to our own noise, our own sound, not to what is being said.  
Jiddu Krishnamurti, Indian philosopher and writer, *The First and Last Freedom* (Harper, 1954)

**O**ne of the simplest and most sincere compliments you can pay somebody is to show that you are listening to them - hearing the message they intended.

Most of us would describe ourselves as good listeners. But are we? How would others describe you as a listener? Unless we have a hearing impairment we can hear noise. Yet what we actually listen to is more to do with our mind than our ears.

One sure way to kill commitment and motivation is to show your staff that you don't really listen to them. Not by what you say, but what you do. If you want your people to listen to you, show that you listen to them. Incorporate their good ideas and suggestions or explain why they are not practical or balanced.

There is nothing magical about being a good listener. Good listeners are better at concentrating - staying focussed on the message of the speaker. They have the ability to overcome internal (mental) and external distractions.

People with over inflated egos or who are very self-focused often make poor listeners. Nothing the speaker is saying could be more important than what they are thinking.

### These are some of the things which distract our minds when listening:

- Preconceived ideas about the topic - established mindsets, attitudes, beliefs.
- Thinking about an unrelated thought triggered by the speaker.
- Selective hearing - only hearing what reinforces your point of view.
- Thinking about something said that you didn't understand.
- Dislike of the topic or the speaker.
- Tuning out because you don't value the opinion of the speaker.
- Assuming you know what the speaker is going to say.
- Wanting to jump in and respond immediately.
- Taking offence at something that was said.





- Thinking about what you will say when the speaker stops speaking.
- Fabricating a story in your mind to massage your ego. (Concocting lies)
- Focusing on a mannerism or something about the person's dress.
- Resenting that the other person is dominating the conversation – turning it into a monologue - which means that you would like to intervene to respectfully assert your preference to have a two-way dialogue.

A manager can employ some simple techniques to develop active listening skills:

- Paraphrasing: Repeating back to the speaker the essential meaning, not word for word, of what has been said. For example, "What I hear you saying is..." "Do you mean that...?" "So in other words are you saying...?"
- Reflecting feelings: Describing or acknowledging how the speaker might be feeling. "I'd feel frustrated if this was happening to me." "I feel that you are pretty pissed off about this." "I feel that you are really angry about this." "You sound to me as though you feel that you have been unfairly dealt with."
- Summarising: Briefly summarising the key points the speaker has been making. "So in summary, are you saying that...?" "Well, your main concerns seem to me to be..." "Have I got this right? The gist of what you are saying is..." "OK. Let me see if I am understanding what you are saying. I may get this wrong, but are you saying that the reasons you are not happy are...."?

To actually use these simple techniques forces you to actively listen. Good listening is an art that requires vigilance and constant correct practice. By doing so you will develop greater understanding of other people's thoughts and feelings and demonstrate that you are really hearing and listening.

You'll know when you are in the company of a good listener because their responses, what they are saying, eye contact and body language will signal to you that, right here, right now, you are the most important person in the world to them. And doesn't that feel great?



## Golf, Painting, Listening, Composing

Sometimes you have to be silent to be heard.

Stanislaw J Lee, Polish writer and aphorist, *Unkempt Thoughts*, (St. Martin's Press, 1962)

Crisis in dialogue occurs when the participants... fail to really address each other but turn away defensively, each within himself, for the purposes of self-justification.

Reuel Howe, American theologian, *The Miracle of Dialogue*, (Seabury, 1963)

We cannot ignore tone of voice or attitudes. These may be just as important as the words used.

Maurice S Trotter, New York University, *Supervisor's Handbook on Insubordination*, (Bureau of National Affairs, 1967)

**Which word above is the odd one out and why?** Listening, because it is the hardest skill to acquire. "RUBBISH!" I hear some of you demur as you consider your golfing, painting and composing accomplishments – or lack of.

Now I speak with some authority on three of the above. I'm an accomplished 'marching golfer' – left, right, left, right. And I once spent an Easter holiday long weekend thoroughly engrossed with easels, canvas and oils producing works of art that would easily embarrass a five year old. Listening I've been working on for 20 years and I still haven't mastered it. Composing I haven't troubled myself with yet.

What is the difference between hearing and listening? Let's use these simple definitions so that we have a similar understanding.

**Hearing.** Let's call that the physical response of your ear to noise – energy, vibrations, sound waves. Unless somebody is hearing impaired, we can all hear the same noise.

**Listening.** Let's call that what your mind does with that noise – accepts it, rejects it, filters it, interprets it, etc. When several people are hearing a speech they are hearing the same words, but what they are listening to can vary widely.

**Most of us are inefficient listeners.** Tests have shown that immediately after listening to a 10-minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, properly evaluated and retained approximately half of what was said. And within 48 hours, that drops off another 50% to a final 25% level of effectiveness.



In other words, we quite often comprehend and retain only one-quarter of what was said. (Source unknown). This compounds the problem when you consider how heavily we rely on the spoken word alone as our main method of communication.

It is said that listening is the most critical skill for a manager. Here are some things to do to be more efficient at listening:

- ❑ When someone is talking to you, stop what you are doing and focus 100% on the person. Turn and face the speaker. (Not while driving a car).
- ❑ Let them finish their point. Don't interrupt. Write down the point that caused you to want to interrupt and then re-focus and continue listening for more information.
- ❑ When you realise that you stopped listening for a moment, be honest and admit it. "Sorry. I just got distracted. Could you go over that again please?"
- ❑ When you don't understand something they have said or you have missed their point, either write it down to come back to later or put the conversation on hold so that you can deal with this now and free your mind to stay focussed on the speaker. "Hang on a second. Just before you go on. Let me see if I have this right. Are you saying that ....?"
- ❑ If your mind is elsewhere, suggest another time for this conversation if possible. "Dennis. I just need to clear my mind of some things. Let's talk about this later when I can give you my undivided attention."
- ❑ Continually use this check to help you stay focussed. Am I listening to my mind more than her words. Remember that as soon as somebody starts talking to you your mind is instantly activated as you start processing the words and meanings. Which 'noise' are you listening to – the 'noise' the other person is making or the 'noise' in your own head? Unless you are particularly vigilant (focussed), chances are it will be the 'noise' in your own head.

Now you can't stop this mind process and you don't want to, but just be aware of who you are listening to – me or them? The price of efficient listening is eternal vigilance.



## Engage Your Mind Before Your Mouth

**S**ome of us react instantly when our buttons are pushed. Our emotional temperature rises quickly and words gush out in ways we often live to regret.

Managers need to be able to remain calm in a storm. They need to keep their emotional reactions under control so that their responses are not counter-productive. As the saying goes, “anybody can hold the tiller when the sea is calm.”

If you feel that you tend to ‘fly off the handle’ and engage your mouth before your mind, reflect on these points:

- ❑ What are you angry or frustrated about in your life? What deep-seated anger are you carrying around about your work colleagues, partner, parents, your family, your friends or your life in general? What ‘wants’ important to you are not being met?
- ❑ Why do you react so quickly? Do you feel that your own standards are being questioned? Is somebody highlighting something that you did less than well – that you know you could have done better? Is your self-image or self-worth being threatened? Do you feel under attack personally and that you need to defend your image? Are you reacting defensively because you know deep down that your approach was flawed?
- ❑ Are you a perfectionist who feels vulnerable or threatened when imperfections are pointed out by somebody else? Perfectionism is not a bad thing – in fact it helps you achieve high standards. But you are probably a pain to work with.
- ❑ Whatever happens, happens. It just is. It is not good or bad. It is only our own meanings that we give to an event that make it good or bad.
- ❑ When somebody says something to you which upsets you, listen to your body – that is observe what you are feeling. See it in your mind’s eye. Picture the tension. Where is it located? What size, shape and colour is it? In these situations pay attention to your body. Take your cue from your level of feelings. If you feel your emotional temperature rising, take that as a cue to say nothing. Practise deliberately holding your tongue. It will help if you can take notes at this point of the things that you want to respond to.
- ❑ It is important that you watch yourself reacting (in your mind). The actual process of watching yourself reacting will in fact lessen your reaction. That is, it will help you to stay calm and say the right words in the right way.



- ❑ At the moments where you are liable to erupt, it also helps to repeat silently to yourself phrases such as, “That’s interesting. Here comes Mr Indignant” or “I can feel my tension rising” or “Time for me to keep my mouth shut” or “Hello. Here comes Mrs Angry” or “Why am I letting this guy’s words upset me?” or “Let her get it all out and then I’ll speak” or “Time to start slow, deep breathing” or “Great. Here is another opportunity for me to learn and grow” or “Words don’t have meanings, only people give meanings to words. What meanings am I giving to these words?”
- ❑ Use a ‘Listening Notepad’. Practise **RESPONDING** not **REACTING**. It looks like this.

| NOTEPAD |             |            |         |
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| Listen  | Stay Silent | Take Notes | Respond |
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