



Topics:

- In one ear and out the other
- Fact or fiction?
- Silence is compliance
- The hidden agenda
- Now you tell me
- You've got mail



In one ear and out the other



How good are you at communicating? Do you check to ensure the intended message was received? Because something is clear in your mind does not mean it is clear in the minds of others. We often take for granted that people see things the way we do. The fact is, they often don't.

The way we interpret things varies significantly from person to person. For many reasons, when two people are reading the same text or listening to the same story they may be processing this same information in different ways. As a result their understandings and responses will vary.

Effective workplace communication is about providing information to staff about something and staff then demonstrating their understanding of the purpose or meaning of the communication.

In organisations, there are many reasons why communication suffers. We all like to know what is going on. Good communication improves job satisfaction, staff morale and productivity.



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

- ☐ Communicate to staff an unpopular decision honestly and forthrightly.
- ☐ Discuss sensitive issues in a tactful way by taking the staff member aside and away from the hearing of others. Behind closed doors in neutral territory is a good place.
- ☐ Think through the consequences of an issue and the impact it may have on staff before you announce what is going to happen.
- ☐ Explain your thoughts about complex issues and the rationale for your thinking. It is useful to explain why something is important to you and the organisation.
- ☐ Seek feedback on key issues by finding out from staff what they think and how they feel.
- ☐ Seek clarification from staff to confirm they understand what is required of them.
- ☐ Ask staff to identify the nature and frequency of their communication requirements.
- ☐ Use the most appropriate method to communicate to staff, e.g. where a personal matter needs to be discussed.
- ☐ Discuss the effectiveness of existing communication systems and procedures and for what purpose they are to be used.
- ☐ Inform staff of the most correct and appropriate means of communication.
- ☐ Explain what channels of communication staff may use.
- ☐ Ask staff to comply with organisation communication systems and procedures or to suggest better ways.
- ☐ Respond to communication from others where a response is appropriate and warranted.
- ☐ Inform staff of when you will respond if you can't provide them with the information straight away.
- ☐ Review the effectiveness of your communication skills by analysing how often your intended message is not acted upon.
- ☐ Seek feedback on the effectiveness of communication systems and procedures.
- ☐ Seek feedback about your own communication style.
- ☐ Consult with staff about decisions which will affect them before final decisions are made.



Fact or fiction?

Knowledge is of two kinds; we know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.

Samuel Johnson, quoted in Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson, April 18, 1775.

Every step by which men add to their knowledge and skills is a step also by which they can control other men.

Max Lerner, 'Manipulating Life', in the New York Post, Jan. 24, 1968.

There is a profound difference between information and meaning.

Warren G Bennis, President, University of Cincinnati, 1988

It is much harder to ask the right question than to find the right answer to the wrong question.

E E Morison, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1962

Whatever people think, is.

Otis Singletary, Chancellor, University of Kentucky, 1966

Management information systems are the 'steering wheels', 'rudders', 'compasses' of organisations. Without them we could head in any direction and not really know why we went there or how we got there.

Identifying a problem that needs addressing is usually left to a 'gut feeling' or 'professional judgement'. However to effectively resolve the problem, we need verifiable evidence about the nature of the problem and the need to do something about it. However, never ignore your intuition.

Management information systems are a means by which we gather data and collect information which in turn enables us, through analysis, to determine the status of the area under review. Once we have done this we can then turn our attention to 'fixing' the problem. It is no longer just based on the 'gut feel', but hard evidence as well.



Some actions to take:

- Identify the specific areas for which information will be required.
- Identify the specific needs for information of both the organisation and the work teams within the organisation. What are the key questions for which they need answers?
- Discuss with staff what management information systems are and the benefits to the organisation of using them.
- Define and discuss the key performance indicators for your area.
- Discuss and agree with staff the best means of gathering information they need.
- Discuss alternative means of gathering information.
- Train staff in how to gather the information.
- Identify the people for whom information will be required.
- Identify the areas from which information will be gathered.
- Analyse the results to determine common trends.
- Prepare reports which provide evidence of results and summaries of the statistical data collected.
- Express data in a graphical format.
- Seek staff opinions on information gathered.
- Display information and data for staff to consult and discuss.
- Discuss the findings with staff.
- Prepare a plan to address these needs.
- Resource the plan according to need and current organisation priorities.
- Keep records of all data collected and decisions made.
- Compare the information collected against the organisation's performance indicators.



Silence is compliance

I cannot devine how it happens that the man who knows the least is the most argumentative.

Giovanni delCassa, 1503-1556.Papal Secretary of State,Galateo.

Because the executives don't say what they really mean or test the assumptions they really hold, their skills inhibit a resolution of the important intellectual issues.... Thus the meeting ends with only lists and no decisions.... People's tendency to avoid conflict, to duck tough issues, becomes institutionalised and leads to a culture that can't tolerate straight talk.

Chris Argyris, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Harvard Business Review, September/October 1986.

At times during meetings, some participants are reluctant to talk. This may be due to a host of reasons: lack of knowledge of the topic, being intimidated by the situation, fear of being seen as stupid, unwillingness to express an opposing point of view for fear of causing conflict or suffering repercussions. Whatever the reason the chairperson, you, will need to generate discussion. Here are some things you can say to do this.

- **Ask questions that help to draw people out and express their ideas.**

“What is your reaction to?”

“What are some other ways to?”

“What do you think would happen if.....?”

- **Paraphrase.**

“So what you're saying is.....”

“Before we go on, do you mean that.....?”

“Let me see if I've got it right. You mean.....”

- **Involve quiet people.**

“Mary, what do you think about this?”

“Can you tell the group what you were saying about this to me last week Hon?”

“I'd like to hear what Bill has to say about this.”



- **Ask for examples.**

“Will you give me some examples of the type of thing you mean please Erica?”

Tell me what things happened in your area Jose.”

- **Conduct a quick survey.**

“Can I see a show of hands on this?”

“What is the general feeling about this issue?”

“Let’s hear what the group have to say.

- **Ensure clarity.**

“You look puzzled Ted. Would somebody like to explain how this will work in Ted’s section?”

“Could somebody explain to May Lee just how this will affect what she is doing in her department.”

- **Confront differences.**

“You look as if you don’t agree Sue. How do you feel about this?”

- **Question assumptions.**

“Your idea assumes that staff won’t be happy with what management have suggested. Can you elaborate on that?”

“Can you explain your assumption about the effect this will have on others?”

- **Be supportive.**

“Let’s give Gustav a chance to explain what he means.”

“It’s great that you have made a suggestion about how we should tackle this problem Kia. We need to explore this line of thinking further.”

- **Make procedural suggestions.**

“What we will do is deal with this issue first and then handle that point next.”

“We need to clear up this point before going on because the decision is going to affect all sections.”

- **Seek solutions.**

“How should we proceed from here then?”

“What do you think is the best way to handle this one given all the facts before us?”

- **Check for consensus.**

“Before we go on does every body agree that”

“Am I right in thinking we all support this way of doing it? If you have reservations I welcome them. Let’s hear of any concerns. ”

“How many of you are fully committed to this?”



The hidden agenda

Employees do not like being duped. The 'hidden agenda' is something that haunts the passages and corridors of organisations. It comes wrapped in the guise of something sweet and full of promise, but when the crunch comes it jumps out to deliver its unsavoury message to those naive and trusting workers.

Hidden agendas are common topics of conversation during the gatherings of disgruntled workers who are tired of being tricked into doing one thing in the pretence of another.

Quite simply the hidden agenda is just that - hidden. It is where a manager has a particular position to promote. It may be a position that is politically sensitive or may not be in the 'best interests' of the workers. It could be that it does not have the support of a lot of people within the organisation. It would be folly, then, to open with this position and put it up front. So, it is hidden.

There are those people, managers and workers, who suffer from mild paranoia and are suspicious of the motives of others. They spend too much time looking for hidden agendas. They are probably people who have been on the receiving end of hidden agenda. Because of this their thinking about change and new initiatives, understandably, becomes cynical.

Their conversations start with questions like;

- "What is it they really want?"
- "What is it they're not telling me?"
- "What will be the real downside for me that they are not telling me about?"
- "So what's the truth?"
- "Last time this happened we lost 100 staff."

The point of this article is twofold. Firstly, it is to raise awareness about the intelligence of the current workforce - a maturing workforce that has been around for a while. A workforce that is far more informed about politics, their rights, industrial relations, safety and the world in general. One that it is far more informed than any preceding it.

But more importantly it is to alert you to the fact that if you want to retain the credibility of the people you lead and manage then avoid, under all circumstances, trying to 'pull the wool over their eyes'.

As with many articles in our e-tools, it comes back to some basics. Perhaps you could ask yourself these questions to guide you in how much you can safely tell your people.

- Is what I'm not telling them confidential?
- What are the consequences if they know the truth?
- What are the consequences if they don't know the truth?
- How much do I value my relationship with my people?



- Is my long term relationship and credibility likely to be jeopardised?
- Just how much can I tell them?
- How likely is it they will guess the truth anyway?
- Will they speculate and form their own possibly inaccurate opinions?
- Should I explain my position in detail and try to win them over to my way of thinking?
- Have I explained just why I can't give them all the information?
- If I tell them what it is I really want, have I got the energy or skill to manage the possible resulting conflict?
- Is there some other way that this agenda can be met without any adverse consequences?

There are a many possible combinations of answers to these questions. The bottom line is that if we don't want long term damage to either the relationships or the business, then keep things in the open as much as possible.

Irrationally held truths may be more harmful than reasoned errors.

Thomas Henry Huxley, 1825-1895, English biologist, *Coming of Age of "the Origin of the Species"*

Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they settle it freely.

Thomas Macaulay, 1800-1859, English



Now you tell me

Are your communication problems more the fault of people or more the fault of systems and procedures?

I ran a communication workshop a few years ago for a mailing house. They were quite profitable, but did they have some communication issues. We had people from sales and production attend and also senior management were present.

The workshop touched on a few of the old communication 'chestnuts' like active listening, people issues and body language. I also included a new session. It looked specifically at the internal paperwork used to convey information from one department to another. Things such as order forms, quotation forms, job cards, etc.

Most organisational communication problems get blamed on people. The systems operating in organisations are also much to blame for communication breakdown.

You can resolve many of your own internal communication problems by running a session similar to this one.

Here's how it went.

- Set aside 2 hours.
- Target the group you want to work with - generally it will be with sections / departments that rely on each other for information, e.g. sales and production.
- Select the information (or systems) you want to analyse.
- Take each heading separately and discuss;
 - The information required and the reason for it.
 - Who requires this information and why.
 - Who should provide this information and why.
 - What amount of detail needs to be provided and why.
 - What units of measurement (if any) need to be provided and why
 - How the information will be passed on.
 - What actions happen as a result of it being processed.
- Clarify any points of difference. This is where the real value of the session lies. In this particular business the way all parties had interpreted the forms was so diverse that it immediately highlighted why many of the problems existed.
 - Sales staff had not provided all the information needed. (They thought they had provided it or they didn't think it was important so they hadn't provided it).



- Production guessed what was wanted - angry at sales for not giving accurate information and then getting blamed for mistakes.
- Sales had to deal with dissatisfied customers because of incorrect orders - angry at production for making mistakes.
- Rework, errors and lost productivity resulted - extra cost, reduced profits, staff dissatisfaction and unnecessary tension and bad feeling. All because of a misunderstanding of how a form should be completed.
- Get someone to take notes of any decisions made - this will form the basis for the instructions for completing the paperwork.
- If necessary redesign the forms to remove unnecessary information and to include the required information.
- Make up an example of how the forms should look when completed correctly.
- Keep it simple but complete. Use the 'less is more' philosophy.
- Keep this example in a place that is obvious and accessible.
- Make sure **all** new people are told / trained in how to complete the paperwork correctly. Make sure that they are trained by someone who knows.
- Move onto the next form (or system).

"Having settled on some set of objectives... the next logical step is to see what limits its achievement."

Harley H Hinrichs, United States Naval Academy, *Program Budgeting and Cost Benefit Analysis*, (Goodyear, 1969)

The information we have is not what we want.

The information we want is not what we need.

The information we need is not available.

John Peers, President, Logical Machine Corp., *1,001 Logical Laws* (Doubleday, 1979)



You've got mail



We recently worked at a work-site where the team leaders start their, four day shift after a six day break. While they are off work, their e-mail messages accumulate. The startling thing is that at the end of their six day break, they may have up to 200 e-mails in their 'in box'. One team leader stated he had 800 e-mails to read and/or respond to when he came back after 2 weeks of annual leave.

The truly worrying thing from an information management perspective is that this is not unique to this organisation. This is now an accepted business practice across the world.

Is this the information highway gone mad? What has been created in the minds of people that makes them think everybody needs to know everything? Or that sending an e-mail is the best means of communicating? How many unnecessary cc's exist? Those who send e-mails ad-nauseam as a means of business communication obviously have no idea what impact is created when their e-mail arrives in the recipient's mail-box.

It is with fear and trepidation that many people log on their computers to see their inbox.

The reality is that many of the messages are deleted without being opened, don't get read at all or until they are irrelevant, or don't get the response they require.

Used properly, e-mail is a brilliant tool. But its effectiveness can soon be diminished with blatant overuse and misuse.

If this is you on the receiving end and you want to do something about it then here is what to do.



With the sender:

- ❑ Discuss the key purpose of the e-mails they regularly send to you.
- ❑ Agree the best ways and / or other ways of providing this information to you.
- ❑ Inform them of the amount and quality of information you receive and the impact this information has on you and your work team.
- ❑ Ask them to check that the information they are sending you is needed.
- ❑ Check that the information you receive is needed and inform the sender of any unnecessary e-mails they have sent.
- ❑ Ask them not to send you any unnecessary information.
- ❑ Ask them to check their 'cc' e-mail addresses and to remove your address if it is agreed you do not require this information.
- ❑ Ask them to phone you if they require information that requires an immediate answer.
- ❑ Ask them to clearly state the topic of the e-mail to allow you to identify the relevance and importance of what is being sent.
- ❑ Ask them to indicate a true 'respond by' date in the subject box.
- ❑ Explain the organisational hierarchy which should be for sending and receiving e-mails and ask them to comply with it.
- ❑ Check that the priority allocation they are applying to their e-mails complies with organisation policy.
- ❑ Discuss with senior management what they can do to assist with implementing new measures to improve information receipt and retrieval.