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Communication Mistakes Managers Make

Here are some tips on how to ensure your employees feel free to communicate in the workplace and to make sure your message comes across correctly.

by Beverly Y. Langford, author of "The Etiquette Edge" and president of LMA Communication. Dr. Langford teaches management communication in the Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University.

October 21, 2008

Most of us want to work in an environment in which everyone communicates openly and freely, creating effective networks of cooperation that make organizations function effectively. Not surprisingly, an integral part of a manager's job is developing and maintaining a working climate that encourages the healthy flow of information. Just as importantly, managers need to make sure that they are *getting* the right information from those around them to make informed and tactically sound decisions.

However, managers often make fundamental mistakes that undermine an atmosphere where people feel free to express opinions, complain, or suggest changes to their supervisors. When communicating with their direct reports, many managers make some common errors that not only can derail the exchange of ideas but also create an environment of fear and distrust.



Ignoring The Power Factor

People who manage others often forget that they hold a position of power in the organization and therefore an unequal relationship with their employees. No matter how well you know your employees or how long you have worked with them, remember that you are still the "boss." Your direct reports will naturally tend to filter information they deliver to you. Some managers, for example, don't react well to bad news, and they don't get much as a result. Others, who may not tolerate mistakes, will find employees hiding errors and blaming others when things go wrong.

Managers need to expend extra effort to make employees feel that they can level with their superiors. So many people have been burned in the past that, as a manager, you need to recognize and evaluate how the manager/employee relationship influences on-the-job communication in your department.

Acting Without Explaining

We've all heard about walking the talk. We need to *do* what we say we will do. But, as Philip Harkins points out in *Powerful Conversations*, we need also *say* what we *do*. In other words, we need to make our thinking visible.

A former CEO decided that he needed to mingle more with the employees in his company and therefore began showing up in people's offices and cubicles first thing in the morning to say hello. Because he didn't explain to everyone that they could expect his visits, and because he had a less than stellar reputation for interacting with the troops, employees interpreted his actions in a negative way. They figured that he was seeing who was at work on time.

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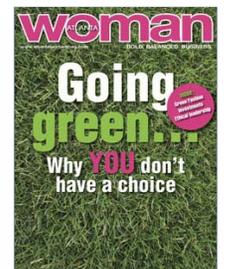
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Managers need to make their thinking visible by explaining the reasons for their actions and the process that led them to a decision. Let people know how your decision will affect them or the department, and what it means going forward

Failing To Give Credit

Some managers believe that the only feedback worth delivering is the feedback aimed at helping someone overcome a weakness or correct a mistake. Many employees, however, find specific, positive feedback highly motivating. *Specific* is the operative word here. Rather than "Gillian, you did a great job," say something like "Gillian, your analysis of that competitive situation gave us the advantage we needed to win that account."

Further, don't be the manager who gathers employees' great ideas and then presents them to the higher ups as her own. Nothing demoralizes a group more than seeing the result of their innovation and hard work without any sign that they were either an initiator or a contributor.

Sometimes managers fail to give credit by making sure that the employee exposure stops with them—for example emailing their boss an article that a direct report sent to them without citing the source, or refusing to pass a customer commendation up the line to put an employee in the spotlight.

Choosing The Wrong Form Or Forum To Communicate

Communicating by e-mail has become the status quo in our wired society. It is a convenient and efficient tool for transferring information, but it does not work well when you are sending a sensitive message, delivering bad news, or transmitting content that someone might misinterpret.

Using the wrong medium can cause a harmless topic to come across as ominous or create stress and anger in a situation that a five-minute conversation could put to rest. Bringing up an issue with an employee in front of a group can spark resentment when a one-on-one discussion about it would seem routine. Smart managers know that the way they send a message may impact the communication's success or failure as much as the subject matter.

Missing The Message Through Poor Listening

Historian and journalist Nathan Miller says that "conversation in the United States is a competitive exercise in which the first person to draw a breath is declared the listener." In the US, the talker seems to have the power, and many organizational structures still favor a top-down communication flow.

Managers need to practice a few key techniques in listening to employees, including eliminating distractions, listening for facts *and* feelings, and listening to the entire message before judging, refuting, or giving advice. Listening involves more than just the ears. We need to listen with our eyes to notice nonverbals, listen with our minds to understand the substance, and listen with our hearts to pick up on the emotions that may accompany or contradict the message.

Every communication event is different, based on dynamic variables. As a manager, however, you can minimize the chance for miscommunication on your end by focusing on ways to encourage and reward those who look to you for direction and support. Avoiding mistakes that sabotage effective communication can build trust, encourage commitment, and enhance the bottom line.

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