

thinktwice™ Today

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September 2006—Organizational Communication Gaps

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ASK THE COACH

Q: I'm having communication issues with a peer. I think it's because of cultural differences — what should I do?

A: First, remember that communication is a two-way street. Your peer is probably struggling to understand you too. Like you, your coworker just wants to be heard and understood. Invite your coworker to have a cup of coffee or lunch in a neutral, relaxed setting. Show genuine interest in your coworker as a person by:

- **Asking** her to share something about herself.
- **Sharing** something about yourself (you might realize you have more in common than you thought).
- Openly **discussing** your communication style differences and how to adapt.

The more you understand each other as individuals, the easier it will be to communicate.

-*Marci Rinkoff is a TLG Associate specializing in coaching.*



Communication Gaps: Perception is Reality

Consider this...

- 90% of leaders think they communicate well. Only 30% of their followers agreed (*The Leader's Voice* by Clarke and Crossland).
- 2/3 of approximately four million workers surveyed by Gallop felt they had received *no recognition* on the job in the past year. Yet 90% of companies surveyed by World at Work and the National Association for Employee Recognition in 2005 said they had an *active employee recognition program*.
- In a 2005 [Watson Wyatt survey](#) of 265 large U.S. companies, 91% of employers said that their managers give coaching and feedback through their performance management process. *Yet only 48% of employees said that they were actually being coached.*

In each of these cases, who is correct? Are the leaders good communicators or aren't they? Are employees being recognized or aren't they? It doesn't matter who is 'right'. Perception is reality. And in both situations, there is a gap between leader and employee perceptions of reality.

Why Miscommunications Happen

Communication gaps and misperceptions cause companies to leak millions of dollars a year from lost productivity, talent turnover, wasted resources, rework and customer attrition (to name just a few).

One of the biggest reasons for poor communications is *making assumptions*. It can seem more efficient to do "hit and run communication" and *assume* that people get the message than it is to have deeper, two-way dialogues about expectations, rationale and needs.

The Solution: Invest Time

Below are tips for preventing communication gaps in the workplace. All they require is a small investment of time. However, the time you invest up front will come back to you later – in fewer misunderstandings, less rework and more satisfied employees.

- **Establish clear expectations.** Never start a discussion or meeting with the assumption that expectations are clear. Always *review expectations* – both yours and the other person's. For example, at the beginning of a coaching session, find out what the employee's definition of coaching is. What does the person expect from you? Does this match your expectations?

- **Summarize and confirm.** Before ending any discussion or meeting, *summarize* key points and agreements. *Confirm* that you and the other person are walking away with the same understanding and take-aways.

- **Explain what and why.** People want to be informed about issues that impact them. When people don't get the full story, they tend to fill in the gaps themselves. When you communicate a message, take time to explain details of *what* is happening and the rationale (*the why*) behind it.

- **Encourage questions.** Asking questions is how some people process information. Avoid getting defensive when people challenge the information you give them. In fact, thank people for their questions. This opens a two-way dialogue that helps ensure that there are no misunderstandings.

President's Perspective

You'd think that with voice mail, web conferencing and other communication "advances," workplace communication would be better than ever. Yet it seems that the more efficient ways we find to communicate, the more misunderstandings happen. It's time to get back to communication basics. That's the theme of this month's e-newsletter, preventing costly organizational communication gaps. We hope that the tips provided will be a good refresher, saving you time and dollars lost on miscommunications.

—*Phyllis Roteman, President*



FAST FACT

Companies with highly effective employee communication programs provided a 26% total return to shareholders (TSR) from 1998 to 2002, compared with a *negative* 15% TRS experienced by firms that communicate least effectively.

Source: 2003/2004 [Watson Wyatt Effective Communication ROI Study—Connecting Organizational Communication to Financial Performance](#).

MEETING MADNESS

While time spent attending **ineffective meetings** had reached a study low in 2000 of 0.7 hours a week, it eventually *tripled* by 2004, hitting 2.1 hours per person.

Source: [IBT-USA's WhiteCollar Productivity Index \(WPI\)](#).

RECOMMENDED READING

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope for the Future by **Margaret Wheatley**. Her work is used by global leaders who handle some of the most delicate conversations one could have!

Dos and Don'ts of Organizational Communication

You've got a big announcement to make to your team about an organizational change. What you say and how you say it will impact your team's reaction. And if they don't understand the message clearly, employees will fill in the gaps with rumors and speculation. For these important communications, here are some Dos and Don'ts for leaders:

Don't be wordy: Be succinct in your message. When you go into microscopic detail about all the points of your message, people tend to tune out. Give people the information they need, when they need it. Stick to the facts and think about the Who, What, When, Where, How and Why aspects of your ideas.

Do have a plan: Have a plan in place to continue the communication beyond your first announcement. Are key leaders championing the idea by talking about it when they can? Weaving communications into day-to-day conversations helps the message stick and lets employees know that the change is here to stay. The day after executives of Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream announced a major financial restructuring, they flew across the US, meeting employees face-to-face to explain the changes that would have to take place. Employees rallied around the company and Dreyer's recovered from the toughest business climate it had faced in 20 years and became the leading ice cream producer, with sales of over 1.5 billion dollars in 2004.

Don't assume everyone understands terminology: Organizational change often brings new terminology. Be sure to define new ideas and describe them consistently. For example, after Hewlett-Packard's (HP) merger with Compaq Computer in 2001, people at both companies were using the common term "customer solution," but the phrase had different meanings in each organization. "HR was the first to identify the disconnects and get them on the table," says a former HP leader.

Do appeal to all styles: Remember that people process information differently. Some need to hear it, some need to read it and others need to see it graphically. Mix words with visuals to appeal to all types of audience needs. And don't assume that everyone is like you. You may be comfortable presenting a 50-page PowerPoint deck full of graphics and spreadsheets, but you'll likely lose those in your audience who don't process visually.

Don't present too many messages at once: People need time to understand, and embrace new information, especially if it's regarding a major change. Avoid overwhelming your audience by focusing on one or two key messages and communicating them well. Give messages time to sink in and build in time for questions.

Do encourage open discussion: In a recent SHRM/USA Today Job Satisfaction Poll, the importance of communication between employees and management was ranked as either very important or important by 96% of all respondents. Don't hide from tough questions by treating communication as a one-way street. An open, two-way dialogue lets people in your organization challenge, work through and accept change. Set the expectation that you're looking for questions and feedback — and avoid defensiveness even if your audience gets defensive. Remember, challenging is a way that people work through issues and is a step toward acceptance.

By keeping in mind some of these tips for organizational communication, you set the stage for credibility, clear understanding and acceptance of your message.

—*Mitzi Chollampel is TLG's Manager of Customer Loyalty*



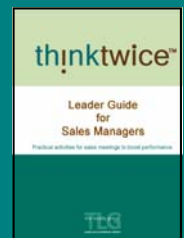
Coming Next Month:

Selecting Sales Talent

- How to make sales simulations pay off.
- Why shortcutting your selection process costs time and dollars.
- Are your sales recruitment and selection processes aligned?

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