



By **Sue Johnston**

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IS FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION THE NEXT BIG THING?

We know it in our hearts: The most profound way to improve communication in our organization is to improve the way managers and employees talk to one another. Here's how to make that happen.

“Anyone who isn't confused really doesn't understand the situation.” Those words, from the late broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, describe a situation many employee communicators find themselves in today.

Each week seems to give us a new technology to help us help employees understand and line up behind organizational goals. RSS feeds collide with wikis, while vlogs compete with podcasts for time and attention. We're picking up instant messages during the videoconference about social networking. Then there's citizen media, which makes

us wonder if we should have the CEO write a blog or if we should skip that step and take her message right to YouTube.

These technologies will bring employees closer together, building communities. Or they might keep us apart, building walls. It all depends on the tool, the audience, the message and the context. It also depends on the week. Every few days a new report suggests that whatever we heard about organizational communication last week wasn't exactly true.

Fortunately, each week also brings beleaguered leaders-managers-communicators a sales pitch

for a new “secrets revealed” book or an invitation to a conference that will explain it all.

Meanwhile, too many organizations are missing what could be the blockbuster communication technology of the 21st century:

Talking together. Conscious interpersonal communication—especially when practiced by one’s manager—can make the difference between “really working” and simply “being at work.”

Despite all the technology, most communication in business takes place face to face. Yet it’s an area where, as a group, professional communicators aren’t involved. To quote Murrow, again, “The obscure we see eventually. The completely obvious, it seems, takes longer.”

What’s so special about face-to-face?

For years, psychology grad students have been hooking people up to devices that measure how our brains respond to all sorts of stimuli, including other people. They’re learning that, in human communication, senses are as important as intellect. Physical proximity provides a more efficient interface.

Daniel Goleman and other explorers of emotional intelligence suggest there are unconscious connections between people. Their concept of “emotional contagion” means we can involuntarily catch the moods of those around us. The emotional connection shows up in body language, too. Watch a conversation that’s going well and you’ll often find the participants unconsciously adopt the same posture and tone. This “limbic symmetry,” usually shows up when there’s empathy around.

Silent Messages, Albert Mehrabian’s 1981 work on nonverbal communication, suggests that

tone and body language transmit 93 percent of the meaning of a human message when feeling or emotion is involved. When is work without emotion?

Meanwhile, in the workplace, The Gallup Organization’s ongoing research on employee engagement, which first appeared in Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman’s 1999 success, *First Break All The Rules, What The World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently*, supports the importance of social bonds and relationships at work. So does data cited, in 2005, by David Sirota, Louis Mischkind and Michael Meltzer in *The Enthusiastic Employee, How Companies Profit By Giving Employees What They Want*. One of the three things employees want, the authors say, is camaraderie.

Why aren’t organizations promoting it?

This evidence suggests people prefer to communicate face-to-face. But why is it the workplace skill people seem to need the most yet demonstrate the least? And why are so few communicators involved in what could be an exciting area of work? Let’s try tradition, our job descriptions, habit, competing priorities, the intangibility of interpersonal communication, thinking it’s an HR function and [insert your favorite excuse here].

Schools aren’t building these skills. If we’re lucky, we learn spelling and grammar, “please” and “thank you” and to use our “indoor voices.” Students may learn to speak other languages, but meaningful conversation in our own language is not on the curriculum. Conversation is something the world expects people to develop naturally. Not studied, not measured and not well-understood, face-

to-face conversation, if not quite an unconscious act, seldom receives careful thought.

Imagine what would happen if everyone in our organizations gave fully conscious consideration to interpersonal communication? The results could be surprising. It’s time for organizations to help people live up to the “effective communication” claim, on their résumés, job descriptions and competency models.

Effective interpersonal communication is a learnable skill set. Developing it will require a deliberate organizational initiative. The way people talk to each other can be viewed strategically, just like the rest of our communication mix. Could communication professionals provide the impetus?

A 2006 report from Watson Wyatt Worldwide suggests companies that communicate effectively score better on financial measures as well as having higher levels of engagement and lower turnover. Still, a worrisome finding is that “two thirds of the firms with higher levels of communication effectiveness are asking their managers to take on a greater share of the communication responsibility, but few are giving them the tools and training to be successful.” What does that mean? Firms don’t know how? They don’t think it’s important?

In 2005, Right Management Consultants and the International Association of Business Communicators reported that 63 percent of 472 organizations they studied said their top communication goal was motivating employees to understand and carry out their business strategy. But only 37 percent felt they were making headway. Involving managers in communicating with employees was the second goal for 42 percent of the companies, yet 48 percent were >

doing nothing about it. Among the excuses provided were managers not understanding their communication roles or not having the required skills or tools. We've been hearing this for 20 years. Is it time we got involved?

In a 2005 Melcrum survey, fewer than half of the 712 respondents reported offering communication training to any level of management. Where it is offered, it's usually presentation skills.

What do people need to learn?

Conventional wisdom and a pile of research say that managers are employees' most trusted and preferred sources for most information about what's going on at work. But organizations can't just ask them to communicate more and better and expect it to happen. The old trick of sending them a set of "talking points," a PowerPoint presentation and a note telling them to have a staff meeting is not communication. Nor is it the support they need.

Managers need context and meaning. They must understand and explain how organizational strategies link to the marketplace and to customer satisfaction. They need to see and show how the work of their units supports these strategies and how individuals contribute.

They need to develop feedback and coaching skills, so they can help employees think, grow and prepare for the future. They need to learn to watch for and catch good performance as well as redirect performance that doesn't measure up.

Managers need to develop listening skills and effective questioning to uncover what underlies a situation. They need to learn to respond, not react, to situations.

And they need to demonstrate empathy. They need to learn to really talk, matching tone, speaking directly and clearly, and be sensitive to timing, context and emotion. And they need to be comfortable being truthful.

They need space. They need time. They need encouragement. And they need a training program. It need not be elaborate or long.

How can they learn it?

Since you can seldom go wrong when you wrap your message in the audience's self interest, start the program with "What's in it for me?" Middle managers feel overwhelmed, under-resourced and out of the loop. Help them discover how effective communication will improve their lives. Let's start with more productive employees, fewer performance problems, lower turnover, higher morale and a better sense of what's really happening.

Then help them see why their role as communicators is important to the organization and to employees. They know the work, the people and the team culture. They can interpret what's going on in the context of the group. They can be much more effective in a brief chat in the lunchroom than a staged rally with a senior executive.

Next, show them what sort of communication people want from their managers. This includes setting clear expectations, letting people know how they're doing, helping them connect their work to the bigger picture and encouraging and supporting frank conversations. Have one or more of their managers attend the sessions to champion communication and reinforce its importance.

Introduce them to coaching—questioning, listening and support-

ing employees in making decisions. Then have them practice, using meaty, realistic case studies. Working in threes, rotating as manager, employee and observer, give them lots of time to try on the new styles. They'll moan about role-plays, but they'll learn.

Give managers planning tools and templates to take away, along with up-to-date information on current organizational issues. With the core messages, give them the context for and the reasons behind decisions. Make managers partners in an ongoing two-way communication process that provides a way to get information and a place to take their employees' concerns and ideas. Such a system will support them in making communication a regular, informal process, not an occasional event.

Finally, remind everyone that one of the few things in life a person can totally control is how he or she communicates. If there's one thing middle managers yearn for, it's something they can control.

Don't expect overnight miracles. Creating new habits takes time. It also requires reinforcement, so consider coaching or other follow-up activities. Practicing conscious communication requires people to really think, really listen and really feel. That's not easy.

But to quote Murrow one more time, "Difficulty is the excuse history never accepts." ■