Your Communications May Not Be Communicating

by Ron Ashkenas
FEBRUARY 15, 2011

[For more, visit the Communication Insight Center.]

Have you ever been in an organization where communication was not an issue? If so, you’re the exception rather than the rule.

Large organizations in particular have always struggled with the challenges of communications. In fact, the concept of span of control – a decades-old organizational design principle – was derived originally from communications research analyzing supervisors’ interactions with various numerical sets of subordinates. For example, one study noted that going from four to five subordinates increased potential interactions from 44 to 100; and that going from seven to eight brought the total from 490 to 1080. Hence the ideal number for traditional spans was usually pegged at seven, so that supervisors would be able to get more face time with their workers.

Today, we’re not restricted to face-to-face communication for conveying information, and most companies have invested in full-time communications professionals. Consequently organizations are constantly communicating with their people through a wide range of modes and media: Newsletters and magazines, email blasts, town meetings, streaming videos – as well as traditional meetings. But yet somehow, communications are still a problem. As one of my clients is fond of saying (along with George Bernard Shaw), “The greatest problem with communication is the assumption that it has taken place.”
Now, I’ve never found a senior manager who says that communications are not important; so why do organizational communications continue to break down despite all of the investment and generally good intentions? Let me present three common traps:

1. **Lack of context:** How many times have you received a message but didn’t know what was behind it or why it was important? Not long ago, the senior leaders of a large corporation decided to launch a number of very critical initiatives, and consequently assigned project leaders from their areas. When the overall effort started to fall behind, the CEO called a meeting of all the project leaders and discovered that they lacked a common understanding of the initiatives: their urgency, their impact on the overall business, and their interconnectedness. Without that context, the project leaders were treating this as just one more assignment among many.

2. **Lack of questions and dialogue:** Recently I sat in on an “all-hands” meeting for a department of a major bank. At the session, departmental and corporate leaders made well-prepared, informative presentations — complete with slides, graphs, and videos. After 90 minutes of presentations, the departmental manager asked if there were any questions and — when none of the 150 people raised their hands — adjourned the meeting. A week later, when people were asked to give feedback about the meeting, most recalled that it was “useful” but very few could remember any specific takeaways. Without questions, your audience has no opportunity to digest the content through discussion, and communications are hard to absorb.

3. **Lack of connection:** Finally, communication is always local. The first lens that everyone uses to understand a message is: “What does it mean for me?” Because of that, communications can often be interpreted differently depending on the person. For example, a number of years ago an executive visited a manufacturing site to give employees the “bad news” that the plant was going to be gradually shut down over the next few years. After his announcement, he was surprised to hear a wide variety of reactions: Some were happy that they would get a payoff and be able to retire early; others were indifferent because they didn’t think it would really happen; and most thought it was too far into the future to worry about at present. All of the employees received the same message — but the individual interpretations were different, and none of them were what the executive expected. But because this executive didn’t have personal relationships with the plant workers, he was not prepared for their reactions.

Communication in organizations is equivalent to the neural network in the human body. If there is a misfire, the organism becomes inefficient or even dysfunctional. If you’re a manager, part of your job is to strengthen the communication pathways to, from, and between your people. To do this
effectively, take the time to provide context, encourage questions, and stay sufficiently connected to the different ways that people respond and react to messages. Of course there is more to effective communication than just these factors; but for most managers, it’s a good place to start.

How have you avoided the communications traps described here — and what others have you seen?

Ron Ashkenas is a Partner Emeritus at Schaffer Consulting. He is a co-author of *The GE Work-Out* and *The Boundaryless Organization*. His latest book is *Simply Effective: How to Cut Through Complexity in Your Organization and Get Things Done*. He is the co-author of the forthcoming Harvard Business Review Leadership Handbook, which will be published in 2018.

This article is about COMMUNICATION

FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Comments

Leave a Comment

0 COMMENTS

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators’ judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.