

Tired of Hearing People Complain About “No Communication”?

By Dianna Booher

A common complaint echoes from corporate break rooms to family living rooms: “There’s just no communication around here!” With paper swirling on every desk, email in-boxes overflowing, a cell phone in every hand, what do people mean by such a comment?

Often this sentiment refers both to the quality and the frequency of the information received—not the quantity. People typically devalue—or flat-out reject—what you’re saying for the following reasons or perceptions:

- They think you’re lying or misleading them. They don’t trust you.
- They’re getting incomplete information.

If this is the perception of your message (speech, email, meeting, memo) then there might as well be “no communication” at all. When the message is met with anger, a blank stare, or apathy, the same old issues—distrust and incomplete communication—are often the culprits. The following strategies will help you construct and deliver a message that informs and encourages others while gaining buy-in for your decision—whether relaying good news or bad news.

Explain Your Reasoning Behind Decisions

People may not agree with your decisions and actions, but at least they’ll appreciate your willingness to clue them in. What are the facts? What are the criteria? What are the extenuating circumstances? What other suppliers’ and partners’ actions affect the decisions and deadlines? What are the wild cards that no one controls? Without such information, your decisions and actions sound arbitrary. Rationale, however right or wrong, provides a sense of fairness and justice. Without the details, people rarely buy into the mission for the long haul.

Be Relevant Rather Than Resented

Go home and announce something as specific and personal as a job change, and see if family members don’t sift the details differently: Your spouse asks how much raise goes with the increased job responsibilities. Your teens want to know if they have to change schools. Your in-laws want to know if you’re moving the grandkids across country. Your CPA tells you whether you’re better or worse off after the tax hit. The same information or “news” means different things to different people. Don’t expect your different audiences to do your work for you.

Interpret information and translate the relevant details to the different people or groups involved. Think about what your information means to them specifically and clarify that when you share your news.

Focus on the How, Not Just the What

Unless you're running for the Oval Office, tell people how you plan to implement things. Mushroom management whereby everyone is kept in the dark about HOW you're going to "provide value-added service" or "a unique customer experience," or "bring innovative products to market" no longer works.

But specificity in stating goals is not the only "how" that needs to be spelled out.

When you praise someone, focus on the how—how did they get the good rating? Otherwise, how will they know what to repeat?

In statements of values or ethics, once again, communicate the how. How will people recognize good ethics or your values when they see them? You say you value risk. How do they evaluate risk in your department? What's acceptable risk? What's an act of lunacy? You say you reward commitment. How will you measure that?

Tell Bad News Promptly: Never Underestimate the Importance of the Two-Minute Warning

Without the two-minute warning before the ballgame ends, the trailing team may miss their chance to redouble their efforts to catch up before the final buzzer sounds. The game ends; they lose. Ditto for communicating in business: The worse the news, the sooner people need to know it and the more effort should go into communicating it.

Frame negative news positively when you can do so honestly. "Inside every cloud there's a silver lining" became a cliché for good reason: Its truth should not be tossed aside without due consideration in bad-news situations. If your team sees the glass as half empty, you have every right—even obligation—to help them see it as half full.

Instead of hiding the complete details, provide them in such a compelling way that you gain buy-in for your action plan. Negative news is no time for withholding. It's time for prompt truth telling in a positive frame of mind with a clear plan of action.

Leaders often get so busy analyzing, problem-solving, questioning, coordinating, deciding, and delegating that they fail to communicate what's going on to those standing on the sidelines. They tell too little too late. And in the absence of information, people get their facts from whatever faucet is leaking—whether accurate or not. Build your credibility by keeping people "in the know." In spite of Jack Nicholson's famous line from *A Few Good Men*, they CAN handle the truth!

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For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.