

EFFECTIVE SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS

PART I

“WHY WON’T THEY LISTEN?”

by

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In Part I of his series on safety communications, loss control expert Larry Hansen reviews why so many safety communication efforts fail, and shares three truths about effective communications.

Ask any group of business managers to name the one organizational problem that frustrates them most, and which is often at the core of operational snafus, and I'll bet more often than not you'll hear: "**POOR COMMUNICATIONS**"! And that goes for accidents, injuries and LOSS costs as well. The National Council of Compensation Insurers has estimated that as much as 40% of workers' compensation costs can be linked to how an employer communicates with, and responds to worker injuries.

Communications expert John Drebing says: “You attain the next level of excellence by changing who you are...and you change who you are by changing what you do.” When it comes to designing, implementing, and administering an effective safety communications process, researchers suggest that many organizations need take a closer look at ‘what they do!’

With few exceptions, poor communications stands out in both performance literature and management practice as the #1 cause of substandard performance in many organizations. It's cited frequently for: low productivity, late delivery, poor quality, low moral, workplace accidents, and most other undesirable events impacting profitability. In "A Passion for Excellence", Tom Peters and Nancy Austin concluded that: "Nonfunctional communication is at the heart of most management problems." And most operations executives agree, allocating millions annually to improve the situation. Yet in spite of this recognition, and huge financial commitment, communication problems persist.

In titling this article, I actually faced this exact dilemma. I'll bet most readers, to this point, assumed I was referring to ‘employees’ as those ‘who just won't listen’! Oh well, another case of poor communications! The title, and theme of this article, addresses effective communication as a management opportunity...not an employee problem. It's managers that need to listen (and learn) say researchers and management experts, including Stephen Covey, author of "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People", who identifies communication as the fifth habit: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

When it comes to communication and credibility, employees in America's workplaces have some very definite opinions, and they're not very complimentary...and not too far from wrong. Spend a fair amount of time in employee lunchrooms, break areas, or by the office water cooler, and eventually you'll hear this all too common satirical question: “How can you

tell when an executive is lying?" Answer in unison: "Their lips are moving!" Would I lie to you? According to the findings of an ASCLU workplace survey published in the August 1997 issue of Fast Company magazine, the answer is --'Yup!' Of those polled: 93% acknowledged that they lie regularly; 56% admitted they have been pressured to act unethically, and 48% have committed illegal acts. And a more recent pulse on the issue— Dec. 30, 2003; NPR's website listing the top ten 'strategy and business' books is introduced this way: "Not surprisingly, books about scandals dominated the best-selling business books of 2003. Perhaps the Budweiser Lizard was insightfully correct in his observation: "Never send a weasel to do a ferret's job!" (Oh, how I love that commercial!) Business leaders indeed have a credibility gap in the eyes of many frontline workers, and this perception (reality) is more frequently influenced by the communication techniques they employ, rather than the content of the message they attempt to convey.

Research on organizational communication suggests that the majority of advice given to business executives on how to effectively communicate with frontline employees is "wrong!" To move information through an organization, many companies establish corporate communications departments which focus on 'word-smithing, format, and technology' to facilitate internal messaging. The answer to many organizational communication problems, however, doesn't lie in the message content or the technology, but rather in the methods employed.

Think about the traditional communication mindset in your own organization. What methods are most frequently used by upper management to communicate safety information to frontline employees? Make a list of these techniques, and then arrange them in order of perceived effectiveness. This exercise might seem simplistic, but it, in fact reveals the prevalence of what I call the: "I've got the bull by the horns" phenomena -- the belief that senior management understands the information needs, and controls the messaging process.

At this point, let's "cut to the heart" of the issue. If we want to find out what is most important to, and how to most effectively communicate with frontline employees, whom should we ask? Who would know best? Who are the experts?

"EMPLOYEEES", of course! In doing this, we discover a very different perspective, the "I've got the boss by the hands" phenomena a/k/a the truth! Bottom line, if we're not communicating successfully with employees on safety issues, it's most likely a matter of technique and approach. We need to determine why our messaging fails, and change our approaches accordingly.

As Einstein (paraphrased) once said: " The thinking that gets you out of trouble must be far different than that which got you into it in the first place" -- although you wouldn't think it would take a genius to figure that one out!

When it comes to effective communication, what we desire, and what we in fact attain are indeed very different. Ask a bank teller, computer programmer, machine operator, sales clerk, construction worker, truck driver, or office worker and you'll quickly learn that frontline employees of all titles and roles:

1. Distrust information they receive from senior managers;
2. Believe that company publications are propaganda;

3. Hate watching executives on videos;
4. Don't bother reading those annoying leaflets in their pay envelopes, and
5. Have little interest in receiving general corporate information.

Contrary to common beliefs, frontline employees have little interest in receiving anything that doesn't directly impact them or their work. If a company's communication program isn't targeted directly to the worker and his or her specific interests, it's wasted paper (or e-time). Most isn't . . . and hence most is!

The critical question then is, "what works"? Much research has been conducted to determine that, and the findings are enlightening. A common corporate assumption is that employees want information directly from senior managers via mass techniques such as satellite telecasts, corporate meetings, road shows, executive stump speeches, and feature articles in the company newspaper - NOT!

These approaches are founded on the "as-the-bull-sees-it" approach, which assumes that employees perceive senior executives as well informed and credible. An unfortunate reality, however, is that employees frequently distrust senior managers. Employees trust one person in their work environment most -- their supervisors; the person they work with daily and communicate with routinely. Employees view their immediate supervisor as their most credible source of honest and objective information. In view of this, they prefer to receive, and most readily accept communication from them. Why? Because they trust them.

Evidence supporting this includes: (Larkin)

- A Wyatt Consulting study (England) finding that 70 percent of employees felt the information they received from management was misleading; and,
- A Lou Harris & Associates Poll (United States and Canada) revealing that 62 percent of office workers were not confident that management was honest in their dealings with them.

And, in contrast:

- A major US auto manufacturer's study confirming that 83 percent of employees rank their immediate supervisor as their most believable source; and
- Australian researcher Dennis Taylor's findings that 90 percent of Australian employees believed their supervisor was either "always or normally" telling the truth.

From these studies by researchers Sandar and T.J. Larkin, three 'truths' have emerged as guide posts for designing effective organizational communications for safety:

Truth 1 – *The most effective communication to frontline employees comes directly from their immediate supervisors.*

Supervisors are the opinion leaders for frontline employees. They are the ones that have earned credibility, and hence, are the ones that can most influence employee behaviors. A top or mid-level manager's success in communicating on safety depends upon their success

in communicating with supervisors!

Many corporate communication initiatives are inconsistent with this fact. In practice, communication is dominated by 'top to bottom' approaches; i. e., (open-door policies, MBWA, direct lines to the boss, etc.) which creates supervisory bypasses, weaken supervisory credibility, and result in a 'not so good news/bad news' scenario.

The 'not so good news' is: employees take this stuff seriously! When told they have a 'direct line' they use it, and problems, concerns, and questions 'rise up' and inundate executive offices, resulting in organizational overload and slow response, which further damages management's credibility and fuels employee cynicism.

The 'bad news' is: when executives do respond to employee concerns on a timely basis and fix problems, the message sent to frontline employees is clear: "Hey, if you want something done around here, you gotta take it up top!" (The ultimate bypass: front line to top line.) It's the start of clogged communication arteries and organizational paralysis!

CEOs embrace communication approaches such as these because they truly believe they favorably impact employee behaviors. An A. Foster Higgins study of 164 Fortune 500 CEO's found that 97 percent felt their communications affected employee satisfaction, and 75 percent believed it impacted job performance. Evidence, however, confirming that direct communications from executives to frontline employees positively impacts work behavior is slim, while there is a wealth of evidence to the contrary.

To impact safe employee behavior, managers must increase the perceived power of supervisors by communicating credible information to them (i.e., putting them "in the know") and by establishing them the "credible source" for employees. Bottom line, it is not an employee's relationship with a CEO that impacts safe work performance; it is the employee's communication relationship with their supervisor that's most important. A strong credible relationship at this level minimizes distortion.

Studies confirm that somewhere between the CEO (sender) and frontline employees (receivers), organizational messages are distorted, and the 'snag' is generally middle management...for a myriad of reasons. Because of this, executive messages don't 'trickle down' as conceived, nor do they have the impact on performance expected. This supports Larkin's second communication truth:

Truth 2: *Effective communication must be delivered "face-to-face" by supervisors.*

Dick Vitale would say: "Get in their face, baby!" . . . and he'd be right because supervisors are the information sources most recognized and trusted by employees.

Unfortunately, executives often don't see this and continue traditional communication campaigns, publications, video reports, and meetings. The problem is what executives have to say generally doesn't interest frontline employees. I've seen this first hand, perhaps you have as well? One company with which I am familiar tried to communicate corporate challenges and results to regional staff by sending the President and a contingent of senior staff on a 'dog and pony show' every spring to deliver a 'state of the company' message to all regional employees. These sessions always ended with: "Are there any questions?"

There never were, and not because the meetings were highly insightful or informative...ZZZZZZ! To avoid embarrassment local managers would 'plant' questions in the audience....Therefore, they continued.

Researcher Larkin identifies British Telecom an interesting case in point. British Telecom is reported to have one of the most respected corporate communication programs in the world; consisting of numerous proactive initiatives, yet their results in 'informing their work force' were only slightly better than the United Kingdom's average (i.e., British Telecom 42 percent of employees well informed versus the United Kingdom's average of 40 percent.). Why did all of this effort produce but a small difference? Larkin suggests it was because it conflicted with communication truths #1 and #2 – it wasn't delivered by supervisors and wasn't done "face-to-face".

Truth 3: Frontline employees are only interested in information that directly affects them, their job, and their immediate work.

This is more commonly referred to as: 'WIIFM' (What's In It For Me). If management is not broadcasting to these 'call letters', employees aren't going to tune into the message! Executives can talk about risk patterns, loss trends, accident rates, insurance costs and corporate strategy, but to the frontline employees, that's all irrelevant! Employees don't think like managers because employees aren't managers! Employees have different beliefs, concerns, and interests. Employees don't have bad attitudes -- they just don't value the same things managers do. CEOs need to understand that 'how they communicate', more than 'what they communicate', is the critical issue...at least to those with whom they are trying to communicate.

Employees interpret information that isn't specifically targeted to them, about them, or for them with cynicism. As far as they're concerned, it's "BOHICA" (Bend Over, Here It Comes Again!")

Not typical? An exaggeration? Not in this organization you say? Unfortunately, it's truer than most would like to admit! Research confirms the reality of distrust and cynicism between management and employees: (Larkin)

- A Hay Management Consulting Group (Canada) study:
 - "Only 50 percent of employees have pride in their companies";
- A Hay Group study in the United States:
 - "70 percent of hourly employees lack confidence in top management";
- A Boston University School of Management survey:
 - "80 percent of workers felt management could not be trusted."

Consider the reality (i.e., employee perceptions) in your own organization? Have your company's best efforts to communicate a sincere interest in safety improvement ended up with cynical employee responses, such as: "SAFETY IS OUR #1 PRIORITY" changed on the work floor to read: "SAFETY IS OUR #1 SLOGAN"?

Executive intentions, although admirable, aren't good enough. What matters in effective

communications is an understanding of what information employees need and want. Employees want to know how they're doing, what changes are planned, and what it means 'specifically' for them. Employees need feedback that is relevant to their work environment and which will help them perform better.

If managers want to improve safe behavior, they must shed a number of traditional communication beliefs and approaches, and invest in building a communication process guided by the three core "truths" of effective communication:

1. Communicate through supervisors (to build strong first line trust and credibility),
2. Require that communications be "face-to-face" (to allow for feedback, expression and dialogue), and
3. Communicate information that is specifically relevant to employees and their work. (address their WIIFM questions).

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