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Resources

# From Factory Floor To The C-Suite

### Manufacturing good communication in an industry of glitches.

**By Dianna Booher, CEO of Booher Consultants**　　　　　　*May 2, 2007*

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*"I don't want any yes-men around me. I want everyone to tell me the truth -- even though it costs him his job." -- Samuel Goldwyn*

"Nobody takes vacation until we finish this inventory," the supervisor of the day shift announces to his crew.

"What's the point of finishing inventory if the guys upstairs can't ship until next month anyway?" Benny asks. "Shouldn't we coordinate with them first?"

"Getting product out the door is their problem."

Lack of "circular" communication within organizations is eventually exposed to the outside world: to customers, to suppliers, and to strategic partners. And it drives them nuts -- if not out of business. Companies also lose employees because people don't talk to each other. Period. It's that simple. And that complex.

So what's circular communication? Communication going in all directions. Up the chain. Down the chain. Across departmental lines. From the day shift to the night shift. Feedback from the boss to the staff and vice versa. Conversation with customers.

For the most part, such communication just doesn't happen. At least, not routinely.

The colossal internal communication collapse creates chaos -- missed deadlines, defects, wrong orders and other foul-ups. In most cases, the problem is not the problem. The problem is not the technology. The problem is the communication about the problem.

Circular communication requires a plan, patience and persistence. And when those are lacking, profits and people suffer.

## Don't Delay Bad News

The vice president of operations for a large pharmaceutical company poured over the drawings for a new lab they were scheduled to move into in three weeks.

"I don't see the hoses for the specialty gases -- where are those?" he asked the project manager in charge of the move.

"There are none. They accidentally left them out."

"What?! How long have you know this?"

"Four months."

The project manager had continued with the site construction right up to almost D-Day, fearing the reaction of his boss and knowing

**"I Have Bad News -- Sit Down"**

the situation would be discovered sooner or later. Denial, deception, embarrassment, and fear routinely lead to delay -- even when the consequences threaten to engulf people.

Sometimes attitude "flavors" a message: A client called us recently to discuss a major problem as communication filtered from top to bottom in their organization. Rather than passing on news from executives to factory workers, responding to questions,

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| E-mail | 28% |
| Face-to-face meetings with supervisors | 19% |
| Face-to-face meetings with senior leaders | 18% |
| Formal letter/memo from executives | 12% |
| Employee Web site | 8% |
| Teleconference or videoconference | 6% |
| Newsletter | 4% |

and helping employees "see the glass half full," supervisors assumed a victim mentality themselves. Fearing a negative reception from those they supervised, they interpreted messages from the top with a negative slant. And the really negative messages -- those about transfers denied, terminations, or layoffs -- got delayed, often for several days.

But bad news rarely gets better with delay. According to a recent study done by The International Association of Business Communicators, only 37% of companies actually use face-to-face meetings to deliver bad news. Their typical modus operandi? E-mail and letters carry the bad news most often -- 40% of the time.

A survey by Sirota Survey Intelligence suggests that one-third (35%) of employees believe that their own companies do not even encourage reporting vital information up the chain. In those cases, you have the uninformed leading a parade of victims.

The worse the news, the more effort should go into telling it -- and the harder you'll need to work to hear it.

## Make Your Motto: "Who Else Needs To Know?"

Clients cancel orders. Suppliers change delivery dates. Partners change their capabilities. Salespeople leave the company. Accounting miscalculates invoices. Products get damaged in shipment. Things happen. And when they do, those "things" typically affect somebody else's paperwork, due date, delivery time, schedule, costs, budget, priority, work assignment, or staffing.

Make it a motto to ask, "Who else needs to know?" and a practice to notify all the appropriate people right away when changes occur. Have you ever called a hospital about test results only to hear, "Sorry, you'll need to talk to Kelly about that. And he just left for the day -- his shift ends at 3:00." So why couldn't Kelly tell Robert, his replacement, "I'm expecting a call about X. Here's the information to give him." The same communication lapses happen routinely between shifts in factories.

Communication hand-offs between shifts would save the caller and the staff time and trouble: Which machine is on the fritz? What procedure is not being followed today and why? What warning light is on erroneously?

Results: Productivity goes up. You'll get things done efficiently -- sometimes outside the regular channels. Internal heroes in your company will earn a good reputation with your customers and win their trust for the long term. And most important, employees engage.

## Make Self-Reported Mistakes Standard Practice

The FAA requires pilots to report their mistakes so as to learn from each other and minimize airline crashes in the future. Is self-reporting of mistakes standard practice in your organization? Probably not. But can you imagine the value of creating a safe place for employees to learn from each other's mistakes? Publicize your positive messages, of course. But also motivate people to join any conversation that matters; this will eventually result in improvements.

## Make Feedback An Obsession

Walk into the warehouse and say to your teammates, "Good morning." What do you

expect to hear in return? Silence? If that happens routinely, the team relationship isn't working. Yet every day that awkward silence can be "heard" when people say to a boss, "It's done," and hear ... silence in response. In one survey of 1,727 respondents, only 47% of employees reported receiving feedback at least once a week.

One manufacturing client brings together their employees in meetings twice a year to give feedback as a group on key projects and develop leadership skills. During these meetings, executives of their division respond in Q&A sessions about why some projects received funding and why others did not, based on appropriate information or missing data not provided in their budget requests. Workers learn specifically what they have to do differently the next time to build their business cases more persuasively.

Without feedback at work, employees plunge into the riptide of disgruntlement and frustration and eventually drift toward the door.

### Cultivate Compelling Conversations

Consider conversations a learning tool rather than a productivity drain. Start water cooler conversations to improve processes, save money, make money, discover new markets, or innovate. Find new places to talk to get the creative juices flowing. Resolve conflict productively, but don't squelch it. Set the ground rules so that others learn how to respond constructively to diverse opinions, without interrupting, minimizing, and attacking. Level the playing field to generate good debate and input, while keeping the power balanced.

Circular communication is the cheapest raw material you have on hand. And it may be the most essential to manufacturing a great product.

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