4 Ways to Improve Cross-Functional Communication

By DIANNA BOOHER   MAY 18, 2021

HR COMMUNICATION CORNER

The weather forecaster issues a tornado warning, so you get out your new flashlight to make sure it's working in case the electricity goes out. It's not. So you call the help desk at Universal Flashlights, Inc. Department A answers. You explain that you've just put a new battery in your flashlight, but the light is very weak and occasionally goes off altogether.

Department A agent: *We only help you put the battery in. If you have a problem with a weak light or the light won't stay on, I'll need to transfer you to Department B.*

Department B agent: *You say the light's weak? We only deal with flashlights when the light won't come on at all. I'll need to transfer you to Department C.*

Department C agent: *You say the light's weak? We only deal with flashlights when they won't turn off. I'm going to transfer you to Department D. They can help you with a weak light.*

Department D agent: *You say the light's weak? We only deal with flashlights when the light's flickering. I'm going to transfer you to Department A.*

Department A agent: *Why'd they transfer you here? Who'd you talk to earlier? Well, it wasn't me. We can help you put the battery in correctly. But that's it. I don't know where to transfer you. Maybe try this number…*

By the time you repeat the problem for the fifth time, the tornado has either hit or bypassed you.

This ricochet conversation happens to customers routinely with roughly 80% of the organizations they deal with –– until they're frustrated enough to go elsewhere.

To "experience" an organization that has mastered cross-functional communication, call Intuit's Quicken Help desk. By contrast, if you don't mind a headache, try calling Amazon's "Help" for anything more complex than getting locked out of your account. (Make sure to clear your calendar for the next couple of hours.)

So what are the steps to correct the lack of cross-functional communication in your organization?

Reorganize Functionally

The best companies make one person or one group "own" an entire process, product, or service from start to finish.

Knowing or handling only Step 3 of a six-step process makes no sense. When dozens of people or groups share responsibility for outcomes, blame is the typical game: "Not our fault." "Not our department." "We're not authorized to make that adjustment." "We don't set the policy."

Granted, one person or one department can't be responsible for an entire process, product, or service in all cases. Consider these the exceptions:

A defense contractor may be designing, manufacturing, and delivering a fighter jet during a three-year period. A pharmaceutical company may be researching, testing, and producing a new drug during a six-year period. In such large organizations involving hundreds of thousands of people, one person or small group cannot own an entire process from start to finish.

But even in those cases, certainly small groups can own a complete step of a process and at least have a basic understanding of related steps.

The mindset should be much like that of a brain surgeon. She may understand the intricate workings of the brain — but also have a fundamental understanding of the whole body. So if an airline pilot announces there's a medical emergency on board the plane, the brain surgeon could come forward to offer assistance with a heart-attack victim.

Consider this: Is your organization structured in a way that best meets customers' needs? Or did it just evolve? What restructuring would improve communication dramatically?

Cross-Train People on Roles, Departments, and Resources That "Touch" Their Own

If you're talking about servicing equipment, this cross-training might be quickly handled with a schematic painted on the equipment itself. If you're referring to a complex process or service, you may need an introductory or overview training program (self-paced online, in person, or one-on-one job shadowing) to acquaint employees with related roles, steps, issues, or problems associated with their functional responsibilities.

Just make sure employees see the big picture, even if they can't fix it or control it.

Educate Employees on How to Hand Off Calls

Train workers on the proper way to transfer a call. Not just to press a button and then hang up. Such a hand off forces the internal or external customer to start over from zilch, often not even knowing who they were transferred to and why.

Provide an Internal Directory

Yes, yes, I know the reason organizations give for not providing their own employees with such an internal directory of departments, along with a description of what they do/handle. The frequent fear is that such a directory will fall into the hands of competitors, allowing them to hire away top talent.

But the other side of that coin: Leaving your own employees stumbling around in the dark without a flashlight (about who does what and how to reach them) eventually drives your customers to competitors.

Ultimately, poor internal communication always shows up externally –– to customers. Focus on fixing that. Cross-functional communication is an idea linked directly to your bank account.

Dianna Booher

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence — and often by their own published book. Her latest books include *Faster, Fewer, Better Emails*; *Communicate Like a Leader*; *What MORE Can I Say?*; *Creating Personal Presence*; and *Communicate With Confidence*. National Media such as Good Morning America, *USA Today, The Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg, Forbes, FOX, CNN, NPR, and *Entrepreneur* have interviewed her for opinions on workplace communication issues. www.BooherResearch.com @DiannaBooher 817-283-2333

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