



LEARNING  
TO FOCUS  
BOTH YOUR  
MESSAGE  
AND YOUR  
PRESENTATION.

# ARE YOU TALKING **TO** YOUR PEOPLE OR **AT** THEM?

BY ALISON DAVIS ■ ILLUSTRATION BY MARK MATCHO

## THIS COULD BE YOU.

The CEO was cranky. The week before, he had led six all-employee town-hall meetings at major company facilities and held two online meetings for remote workers.

The purpose of these sessions was clear. Senior management had developed a new strategy designed to position the company for success, despite the tough economy. For the strategy to take hold, employees had to understand it, believe it was sound, and know how to do their jobs to support it. The town-hall program was designed to jump-start this process. And the sessions seemed to go well: Every seat was occupied; every employee seemed to pay attention to what was being said.

But now the CEO was holding a one-page report summarizing employee feedback about the meetings. The results? Tepid, at best. Staff had spent hundreds of hours planning these sessions—and the CEO himself had devoted three days to fine-tuning his presentation and practicing his remarks—but employees were neither impressed nor informed.

In fact, while 70 percent of employees said they understood the strategy, less than half agreed with the statement, “I understand what I need to do to support the strategy.” And just 62 percent agreed that, “The new strategy represents the best direction for our company,” while only half said they felt more motivated than they had before the town-hall meeting.

“The way I read these results,” said the CEO, glowering at the senior VP of HR, who had delivered the data, “is that at least a third of our employees don’t get the strategy and/or don’t agree with it. And more than half don’t have a clue what to do.”

The SVP waited without speaking.

The CEO rubbed his eyes. “You know, when no one asked any questions at the sessions, I wondered whether they were really engaged,” he said. “Now I don’t know why we invested all that time and energy. What’s the problem?”

### IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU

A quick trip to the company cafeteria would have answered the CEO’s question. Any three employees in the sandwich line would have been quick to explain why the town-hall meetings didn’t work:

- “I know the CEO was trying to be comprehensive, but it was too complicated—all those slides, all those charts, all that data. I wish he had just been able to sum it up: ‘Here are the three most important things, and here’s what you can do about it.’”
- “Actually, I had a lot of questions, but I didn’t feel comfortable asking them. I didn’t want to seem dumb, or like I was challenging him.”
- “If senior management is serious about the strategy, they should ask employees for our ideas, not just talk at us.”

Employees understood the problem: *The town-hall meetings were designed to fit the communication preferences of senior managers, not meet the needs of employees.*

Employees needed clear, simple, succinct information. What they got was the same MBA-level briefing the CEO would have given the board of directors.

Employees needed the give-and-take of candid dialogue to fully understand the strategy and what it means, but what they got was sanitized, legally approved talking points.

And although employees were eager to participate—to raise obstacles and offer ideas—what they got was a one-way Power-Point presentation.

**D**OES ALL THIS SOUND UNCOMFORTABLY FAMILIAR? Employee communication, the way it's practiced in most organizations today, is simply not working. This problem is not confined to town-hall meetings—it's an issue with print and electronic newsletters, intranets, poster campaigns, and nearly every other channel you can think of. Employees are increasingly hitting the e-mail delete button, avoiding the internal home page, missing Web meetings, and showing up to face-to-face forums only because they feel they have to.

Why does this matter? Because now, more than ever, you need to reach, motivate, and engage your employees. You can't survive this recession unless employees understand where your company is heading, are committed to play their part, and know what they can do to help you get there.

But if employees tune you out, there's no chance they'll know what to do—or be motivated to do it.

### AN OUTDATED MODEL

The stakes have never been higher, and employees have never needed straight talk from their leaders more than they do now. So why do so many organizations keep communicating in the same ineffective way?

The answer is simple. They're stuck using an old model: *Disseminating information = effective communication.*

This model was developed in the mid-twentieth century, when companies became larger and more complex and needed a system for providing consistent information to all employees.

## NOT ONLY DON'T EMPLOYEES HANG ON THE CEO'S EVERY WORD—THEY OFTEN GREET THOSE WORDS WITH SKEPTICISM AND MISTRUST.

So they hired former journalists to help CEOs craft speeches and to create employee magazines that resembled *Newsweek* (but read like cheerleading).

Half a century later, one need look no further for evidence that the model survives than most companies' intranet sites. Despite their apparent sophistication, most intranets are nothing more than collections of memos meant to inform employees about the events of the company.

Here's the trouble: The world has changed, but the internal-communication model hasn't. Outside the company gates, there's been a radical information revolution. The Internet has opened hundreds of thousands of portals. Television has gone from something you passively watch (since you have to get up to change the channel) to a medium you control. Information, which used to be scarce—locked up in libraries—has become so abundant that we complain about too many e-mails, too much choice, too little time to enjoy or manage it all.

And another important thing changed: the "employment contract." All that downsizing and reorganizing your company has gone through since the 1990s has had a profound effect on communication. Not only don't employees hang on the CEO's every word—they often greet those words with skepticism and mistrust.

Despite these seismic shifts, companies still base their communication on outdated assumptions about employees and their needs. As a result, although companies work hard on communication, their efforts often fall short.

### NEWS VS. PERSUASION

Although outdated communication assumptions aren't working, there are two pieces of good news. First, changing the way you communicate with employees isn't that difficult—it simply requires looking at the problem from a different perspective (more on that in a moment). Second, making communication more effective is actually cheaper and easier than what you're doing now, because you can eliminate a lot of wasted activity.

Here's that new perspective: *In order to truly engage employees in your organization's mission, you need to treat employees as customers of communication.*

Note the phrase "customers of communication." The old model assumed that just because employees show up to work and get a paycheck, they'd get the message. The new perspective is based on the reality that employees are busy, distracted, self-directed people who need the same level of attention that customers do.

Here's why: As with customers, you are asking employees to buy something—or, in this case, to *buy into* the purpose and direction of your organization. As we've already seen, this

buy-in can't be accomplished by providing news, which is what you've been doing. It requires persuasion.

### TOWARD EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

To persuade employees, how should you communicate differently? Here are ten essential steps:

**Let go of the assumption that employees are just like you** and that they prefer CEO-style communication. Employees are as different from you as your customers are. Your company's advertising is designed to appeal to your customers, not the CEO; shouldn't your internal communication take the same customer-centric (not CEO-centric) approach?

**Analyze employee demographics.** Need further evidence that employees are different? Ask your HR department to run an analysis of your workforce demographics (information that already exists in your payroll database). When executives at one insurance company did so, they were surprised by what

they learned, especially when they compared the demographics of the senior team with those of the largest segment of the population: the center handling customer relations and claims.

For example, almost all senior managers are men; 70 percent of call-center employees are female. And while every member of the senior management team has a graduate degree (mostly MBAs), half of call-center employees received no education past high school. Perhaps most importantly, senior managers have long tenure—all have been with the company at least a decade—while fully 15 percent of call-center employees leave every year, and most stay with the company only about three years.

One revelation: The senior team assumed that most employees had a good base of knowledge about the company and its services, so they tended to speak in shorthand when talking about the business. But with attrition so high, call-center employees' business literacy was low, so much of what leaders tried to convey only confused employees.

Demographics won't give you every answer about how to communicate, but it's a great place to start.

**Conduct research to determine employee needs and preferences.**

Now that you understand who your employees are, it's time to find out what they need from communication. This is amazingly easy to do: Just conduct qualitative research—focus groups or interviews—with a representative sample of employees. Today's workers are sophisticated consumers of media—they watch TV, surf the Internet, use their cell phones to text, talk, e-mail, and read (or skim) print publications—so they can not only diagnose what's wrong with organizational communication but prescribe specific improvements.

**Reduce the volume.** One of the first things employees will suggest is to cut the clutter. They'll tell you that there are simply too many messages (especially e-mail) for them to handle and still get their work done. And they'll complain that a high percentage of these messages are irrelevant to them. As a result, employees will confess that they often miss important communications—vital to the company and important to them personally—because they get lost in the shuffle.

Here's the dirty little secret about too much communication: It's not only a threat to engagement—it's a productivity killer.

How to turn back the tide? A great place to start is with the insidious e-mail problem. You can use process-improvement methods such as Six Sigma, learn to address the problem, or just employ some good old-fashioned common sense:

- Limit the rights to "send all" to a select group of people.
- Set standards for how e-mails are composed, to whom they should be sent, and when to send.
- Explore the use of alternative communication tools, such as instant messaging, as a way to put e-mail in its place.

**Simplify the story.** Your company may need a complex strategic plan—which takes many pages of PowerPoint and Excel spreadsheets to describe in detail—in order to be successful. But when it's time to convey that plan to the entire organization, it must be boiled down to its essence—otherwise, employees

won't get it. Remember: You don't get any points for being comprehensive; what counts is that employees can understand the strategy and apply it to what they do every day.

**Create the right balance between global and local.**

U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill always insisted, "All politics is local," and it's a valuable lesson: People may be interested in the big picture, but they care most about what's close to home. Although employees have a vested interest in the company overall, their top two questions about any topic are always: "What does this mean to me?" and, "What do I need to do?"

Since those questions are so particular to each region, business unit, function, or department, they simply can't be answered by the CEO or by anyone at headquarters. The solution is to allow more communication to occur locally, where it makes the most sense. That's not easy for most organizations, because it means sending less from headquarters and relying on local units to decide what employees need to find out about—and how they will best understand "what this means to us."

**Unchain senior leaders.** Remember the story of our unhappy CEO? He had spent many hours creating what he thought was a perfect presentation—carefully planned, rehearsed, polished to a fine sheen—that fell flat. The irony is that if he had worked less, he would have been more successful. Employees would have been much happier with fewer slides (or none!) and more interaction: straight talk, an informal Q&A, and an opportunity to candidly explore some key issues.

It's time for senior leaders to break the bounds of perfectionism and give employees what they need to become engaged: *authenticity*. Employees want to hear what leaders really think and feel, not listen to carefully scripted talking points.

**Set managers up for success.** When employees express their communication preferences, they always mention managers. "I trust my supervisor most," an employee will say. "But the top people often don't give her the information to interpret what a corporate issue means to our team."

Once you recognize the intrinsic strength of managers, you have an opportunity to leverage that strength. By setting up managers to be well informed about key issues, and ready to answer questions about those issues, you provide them with what they need to be successful as key communicators in your organization.



**Make communication a contact sport.** In their personal lives, employees are not only avid consumers of media—they're full-blown participants: texting, rating content, posting updates on social-networking sites, YouTubing. But when they come to work, employees are often surprised to find that the avenues of creation and participation are closed to them; they're back to being a passive audience. How retro!



Try to make communication an activity in which every employee can participate every day. This alters the dynamic from “communication is something I view” to “communication is something I do” and can take a number of different forms: creating online discussion forums, inviting employees to participate in polls—even one-question quick polls—and allowing employees to post photos or video.

**Measure effectiveness.** You measure everything: revenues, profits, productivity. So why operate on the assumption that just because communication has been sent that it's successful? You need to apply the same rigor to communication metrics as you do anything else—and make sure you're measuring for four effectiveness criteria:

*Behavior:* Are employees using communication channels? Are they active in communication?

*Satisfaction:* Is communication meeting employee needs?

*Understanding:* Do employees comprehend key concepts? Do they know what to do?

*Attitude:* Is communication having the desired impact on how employees think and feel?

Changing the way you communicate *will* make a difference. It will not only improve the way the CEO views communication but, more importantly, create more of a connection between employees and the organization. How well they understand what's needed from them, and how motivated they are to help the company succeed, often depends on how effectively you communicate with them. ■

## Why They're Not Listening

**OUTDATED ASSUMPTIONS** usually result in misfired communication. Here's a look at three of senior managers' most common misconceptions about employees:

**EMPLOYEES ARE A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE**, with only one source of information about the company: the company's own channels. And they believe everything they read. Companies operating under this assumption tend to concentrate on providing “news” to employees. The trouble is that the “news” is rarely new; instead, the information is usually shared *after* it's made public—and there's no additional context or meaning provided about what the message means to employees.

*Telltale sign:* Press releases are posted on the intranet.

*The result:* Rather than relying on internal communication, employees turn to a variety of official and unofficial channels—including the business media, online networks, and the company grapevine—to get “the real story.”

**EMPLOYEES ARE JUST LIKE SENIOR MANAGERS**, with the same communication needs and preferences. (And employees are a homogenous population, in which everyone is like everyone else.) Leaders operating under this assumption communicate the same way they would to the board: strategic big-picture pronouncements

supported by lots of data. Overall, communication is “one size fits all,” and customization is discouraged.

*Telltale sign:* The reading level of most communication is twelfth-grade or higher, with a preponderance of multisyllabic words and complex sentences.

*The result:* Employees find communications confusing and irrelevant. They wonder, “What does this mean to me?” and, “What do I need to do differently?”

**EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION HAVEN'T CHANGED;** employees are satisfied with the information they receive. Organizations operating under this assumption evaluate the effectiveness of communication based on volume—if a message is sent, the assumption is that it's been received, understood, and acted upon.

*Telltale sign:* The CEO is satisfied after a message has been delivered but ultimately becomes confused and cranky when that delivered message fails to produce the desired effect.

*The result:* Employees wonder why internal communication is so static, old-fashioned, and non-participative. “I want it customized, like my Yahoo! News page,” say employees. And they ask: “Why can't I ask questions and get a response in real time?” —A.D.