

Communication: It's a Contract

by Helen Wilkie

One of the most common complaints in the workplace is, "There's no communication around here!" It's usually expressed in tones of disgust and frustration. However, I have made two interesting observations:

- When asked to specify what they mean by "no communication", most people can't. They do, however, blame management.
- The opinion widely held throughout the rank and file is usually contrary to the belief of senior level managers and executives, who are often oblivious to the problem.

If top level management is serious about running an organization that truly communicates at all levels, internally and externally, it must take steps to create that reality.

1. Genuinely make the commitment

It's easy to pay lipservice to a communicating organization and, unfortunately, many do. Like so many other disciplines in business, communication practices start at the top.

One good opportunity for real communication lies in the Mission and Vision Statements. Whose mission? Whose vision? Too often, these statements are created by public relations people and sent down from the top like a commandment from on high. The lofty ideals they express, however, are more likely to have practical results if they come about through a process that includes those who are expected to live by them, and are communicated in a meaningful way.

2. Recognize that communication always has two sides

There is no such thing as one-way communication. For every piece of outgoing information, someone somewhere must receive and understand the message; otherwise, there is no communication. Because of its two-way nature, I have called this "The Communication Contract"™, and the following is a summary of how it works.

Clause 1: Written Communication

If you want to send a message in writing to someone, either within your organization or outside, you must express your message clearly, concisely and in language appropriate to that particular reader, so that he or she can understand it on first reading. That is the writer's part of the contract.



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If you then send your letter or memo to me, I must read it with enough attention, concentration and respect that I receive and understand the message as you sent it. That is the reader's part of the contract.

Unless both parties fulfill their parts, there is no communication.

Clause 2: Oral Communication

When you make a business presentation, or make a point during a meeting, you must speak clearly, confidently and as interestingly as possible, so that the essence of your message stands out unmistakably. That is the speaker's part of the contract.

While you speak, I must decide to listen, for listening is a conscious act. I must ask appropriate questions to clarify my understanding, and provide you with acknowledgement and feedback that tells you I have heard and understood. That is the listener's part of the contract.

Until both parties fulfill their parts, there is no communication.

Clause 3: Non-verbal Communication

Individuals and organizations constantly send non-verbal messages through their actions and behaviour. Managers who keep their office doors closed send a message—whether intentionally or not—that they are too busy to deal with employees. Companies who operate authentic employee suggestion programs, with appropriate rewards and implementation mechanisms, send a message that they honour their employees' intelligence and value their contribution. Behaviour is the outward-bound part of the contract.

We all "learn" what we choose to believe from the behaviour and actions of others. If an employee regularly arrives late and takes many days off, the manager "learns" that the person is not reliable. If a company has downsized substantially in each of the past five years and expects the same level of productivity from those remaining, those employees "learn" to disbelieve the company's statement that its employees are its most important asset. Learning is the inward-bound part of the contract.

Only when both parties fulfill their parts does communication truly take place.

3. Understand that these skills can—and must—be learned by everyone

If you are an executive or senior manager, first look carefully and as honestly as possible to see if you have these skills, and whether you take the trouble to use them. In particular, how are your



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listening and learning skills? Research constantly tells us employees perform at a higher level when management listens to them.

Then take a look at communication throughout the organization, which may involve a full-scale communication audit. How, where and why is communication breaking down? Which skills are missing and in whom?

Take steps to remedy the problem through training and coaching. Monitor progress and its effect on productivity as well as morale. You will be happily surprised at the outcome.

George Bernard Shaw once observed, “The main difficulty with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.” It’s an illusion we can no longer afford in the constantly changing business world of today.

Helen Wilkie is a keynote speaker and workshop facilitator who focuses on the link between communication and productivity. Her keynotes and workshops cover the specific skills of communication, such as writing, presenting and meeting skills, as well as the importance of communication at work. She is the author of “The Hidden Profit Center: a tale of profits lost and found through communication”, Reach her at 416-966-5023 or hwilkie@mhwcom.com. Watch video clips on her main website at <http://www.mhwcom.com> to get a feel for her platform style and audience response.



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