

Clear communication tips for supervisors

Carol Sutton, Einblau & Associates – July 2007

Communication is everyone's job. It is how people get work done. Seems pretty obvious when stated that way. Yet it is the very factor that trips up most organizations, day after day, in both large ways and small.

We are all in a hurry. When we provide information to each other, we talk about the aspects that have registered most strongly for us, the facts that we think are important. The faster we go, the more we leave out, and those bits are generally the ones that could have provided a basis for the other person to understand the situation and what we need them to do.

Tip #1: Tell the story from the listener's point of view. First talk about what is important to the other person, what they need to know, rather than what you want to tell them. That comes later. Successful communication is always a two-way exchange.

Tip #2: Best practices start at the top. If you're the boss – of the whole company or just your department – no one else will practice clear communication skills unless you set a good example. In other words, walk the talk. 'Do as I say, not as I do' does not motivate employees and colleagues to improve, nor will it bring clarity to your communication with them.

Tip #3: The people who interact with employees directly – foremen, supervisors or managers, regardless of title – are particularly important to the communication process. Most people form their opinions of and reactions to an organization based on their experiences with direct supervisors. Policies and procedures set the tone and expectation of how employees are to be treated, but they are only as successful as their individual implementation. The supervisor's skill in bringing this high level material to life in the everyday workplace will either make or break company communication. Remember, people generally do not leave jobs, they leave a manager.

Large organizations have employees with formal responsibilities for communication and human resources. The most successful of these do not put the onus for communication solely on such professionals, however. Rather they recognize the importance of day-to-day, interpersonal communication and train everyone who has people-based responsibilities in *how* to communicate, not just what information to transmit.

Many managers (supervisors and foremen) say a lack of authority holds them back in communication – and in other leadership practices as well. Yet, to be a leader does not require formal authority; many managers are not leaders and many leaders have no positional power. In fact, genuine leadership is based on knowing our own shortcomings and working with others who can help fill the gaps in our skills and talents.

Although senior managers and business owners clearly are responsible for establishing the organization's direction and environment, it takes everyone, throughout the ranks, acting in concert to make the vision a reality. And that requires clarity, both in what we say and how we say it.

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