

# Communication

## Bulletin <sup>TM</sup> for Managers & Supervisors

A fast-read source of information to help managers communicate better within and between departments, twice a month.

January 2, 2020



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## It's not personal! How to resolve work-related disputes

*Help everyone handle conflict better*

Arguments are inevitable. So rather than avoid them, why not make them better?

Conflict often spurs creativity and improved ideas. Yet in the workplace, leaders often try to curb conflict and stop arguments in the pursuit of civility.

"Too often 'civility' means the mere absence of argument or politely ignoring differences," say Caroline Hopper and Laura Tavares, researchers behind The Better Arguments Project. "Life doesn't need fewer arguments. Instead, it needs *better* arguments."

The researchers uncovered five principles to better arguments. Essentially, these are the keys to having productive discussions where opinions differ but positive results occur.

Use these techniques and guide employees toward them when disagreement arises.

### Pay attention to context

Better arguments cover needs, culture and context of the specific situation. Those are easier to establish and stick to in a formal, argument-prone place such as a meeting.

For arguments that begin organically – on the assembly line or down the hall – leaders might have to step in and give direction.

To get this right, share what's known by everyone about the issue (context), its impact on those involved (culture) and anticipated result (needs).

*Please see Disputes ... on Page 2.*

### Sharpen Your Judgment

## Can fired worker sue firm *and* her ex-boss?

"Hello?" asked Robert, the company supervisor. A name didn't appear on Caller ID, but he had a pretty good idea who was calling.

"I just found out I was fired!" Allison's voice boomed through the receiver. "And it's all your fault."

"Allison, I understand you're upset," Robert said. "Since you weren't in the office, HR decided to handle the communication."

### Was it a violation of FMLA?

"I wasn't in the office because I was sick. I know you think I should be able to control my diabetes and other health problems, but sometimes I can't make it to work," Allison replied.

"I understand that," Robert started to say.

"You don't seem to. In my performance review, you suggested I improve my health so I don't miss work! I've done some research. This violates the Family and Medical Leave Act," Allison said.

"The FMLA doesn't protect you if you weren't performing," Robert replied.

"You didn't judge me on my performance – just on my health," Allison said. "You've had it out for me since I got sick. I'm not just suing the company. I'm suing you – personally."

Allison sued the company and her supervisor for violation of the FMLA.

Robert and his company tried to have the lawsuits dismissed. Did they win?

This regular feature sharpens your thinking and helps keep both you and your firm out of trouble. It describes a real legal conflict and lets you judge the outcome.

*Make your decision, then please turn to Page 4 for the court's ruling.*

### The Purpose of Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors

Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors provides relevant and actionable business ideas to help managers and supervisors improve communication and increase effectiveness.

The Bulletin helps improve communication within and between departments, a major goal for most businesses seeking better performance.

All in a fast-read format, twice a month.

## Disputes ...

(continued from Page 1)

For instance, if Sales and Marketing argue over dropped leads, you'll want to share data on leads and how those affected the bottom line. Make the need (converting more leads) the focal point.

### Take winning off the table

Many arguments come in high-stake contexts. (In the above case, decreasing dropped leads to increase sales affects the bottom line and almost everyone in the company.)

So better arguments can't be about one side winning and another losing.

Arguments should be made for the greater good, not to defeat others.

"When we take winning off the table, we preserve space to speak and listen, creating relationships that can build connections (and) support better decision making," the researchers say.

### Connect and listen passionately

Better arguments happen when people connect personally and prepare to listen. Invite people to "be human first," by sharing a story, not just an opinion, about how the issue impacts them.

Good starters: "What makes you proud about X?" or "What makes

you feel insecure about X?"

As the conversation evolves, you can continue to connect and confirm people are listening to each other by asking, "What is something someone else said that you appreciate?" and "How has others' thinking connected to, extended or challenged your own?"

### Be vulnerable

This could be the most important element to better arguments. Everyone needs to be open, honest and vulnerable when speaking and listening.

Before you start a potentially volatile conversation – or when you pause one in action – try a "contracting exercise."

Ask people to silently fill in blanks, "When I think about this difficult subject, I feel \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_."

You'll hear words like, "angry," "excited," "invisible" or "frustrated." Then say, "Given these powerful emotions, what do we need to do to feel secure in the conversation?"

### Be ready to transform

When all is said and done, get everyone to reflect on the experience and what was accomplished. Prompt responses by filling these blanks: "I came in thinking \_\_\_\_\_. I'm leaving thinking \_\_\_\_\_."

*Source: "Is There a Better Way to Have an Argument?" Greater Good Magazine, [tinyurl.com/argument467](http://tinyurl.com/argument467)*

## TECH CORNER

### Heard of these apps? They're the helping hand you need

Does your staff need apps to help coordinate events? Give customers more flexibility?

Here are a few options you may want to look at (and check with IT first):

**1. Eventbrite** lets you create events and use its event management interface to check in guests.

Imagine having three or four of your staff or volunteers with this app on their phones to make check-in painless at your next event.

**2. CamCard** should be on every

staff member's phone before your next conference or event.

CamCard allows you to take notes and go online to export info into contacts or to a customer relationship management program.

**3. Ink Cards:** Never underestimate the power of a thoughtful note or impactful photo.

This app is traditionally used for thank you cards for weddings or baby gifts, but it can also be a useful customer outreach tool.

You can send customized follow-up notes to new clients or prospects using pictures from your company's events and community outreach.

## COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

### ■ Stop the vicious cycle of 'Yes, but ...'

"But" means trouble.

It negates everything you say before it, often puts fear in the employee who hears it and hurts your credibility.

"It's a good report, Jane, but ..."

"Nice job on the project, Al, but ..."

Instead, try a theatrical technique to combat the negative effects of "but": Add to, rather than contradict, your comments:

"It's a good report, Jane (pause). Now we'll want to talk about integrating the data precisely."

"Nice job on the project, Al (pause). Now, we can pound out details on how it can be implemented by the deadline."

*Source: Liz Kislik, [tinyurl.com/but467](http://tinyurl.com/but467)*

### ■ 4 ways to avoid distractions and stay focused at work

Oh, the distractions! Noisy workplaces, the pull of social media and interruptions break people's concentration minute after minute.

Here are best practices for helping employees concentrate at work:

**Be flexible.** As much as you can, let employees adjust their schedules so they work during their most productive hours.

**Close up the open office.** Low cubicles aren't conducive to concentration. If you can't remedy them, create more quiet spaces people can use when they must focus.

**Brighten up the space.** Pull in as much natural light as possible. Replace dingy, fluorescent lighting with softer, white lights.

**Create some fun.** Employees burn out more easily when working in busy, noisy environments. Carve out time for everyone to relax with quiet recreation (yoga, perhaps), fun times (happy hour) or making old-fashioned, personal connections (potluck, maybe).

*Source: SHRM, [tinyurl.com/focus467](http://tinyurl.com/focus467)*

## Real Problems, Real Solutions

Our subscribers come from a broad range of organizations, large and small. In this regular networking feature, three of them share their successes in improving workplace communication.

### 1 Caught in middle of departmental arguments!

We have a lot of different departments at our company – and a premium on space.

This often leads to arguments when departments battle over a new space that opens up.

Departments would claim they were moving to the same area, and we got caught in the middle and had to sort through complaints.

What a headache!

#### Laying out the facts

Our solution: We started to hold monthly facility planning meetings.

In the meetings, we'd discuss who's moving where and lay out a schedule of what's going on.

We don't make the call on who gets an open space or conference room – that's upper management's decision.

There are still disagreements sometimes, but folks know they have to take it to upper management – not us. We just lay out the facts and let them sort it out.

Now when we move people, we don't have to worry about any backlash.

*(Joel Christensen, VP of Water Operations, Metropolitan Utilities District, Omaha, NE)*

### 2 Custom tool makes hiring a snap today

When we were looking for a new employee with specific experience, we discovered it's not easy to identify who will be the right fit for a job.

Just because someone has a degree in a certain area doesn't mean they'll be able to do what we need them to do.

#### Helped us make a smart pick

To weed out people more quickly, we developed a self-assessment tool.

It's very job specific. It might ask, "How do you rate yourself on Excel?"

The tool has made a big difference. Several people took the test, and we realized they weren't the right fit.

But it's also helped us identify good candidates we may have overlooked.

There was one person we almost didn't interview because of his lack of experience. But we decided to give him a chance.

Based on the interview and the assessment tool, we realized he was the perfect candidate. And he's been a great hire.

*(Patti Galloway, HR Director, CI Agent Solutions, Louisville, KY)*

### 3 Recruiting went from good to great

We had a robust recruiting process that helped us build a solid team in our early days. It involved:

- wordy, funny, earnest job descriptions to find cultural fits
- an audition where candidates talked about and showed their talent, and
- large, group interviews to find and vote on cultural fits.

#### Sounds like a turnabout

It worked well to create a culture. But we realized we needed diversity to keep our company, culture and creativity fresh.

That's when we changed to:

- outbound recruiting – instead of posting jobs, we actively look for people who have been successful
- giving managers more autonomy in choosing their team members, and
- hiring for specific competencies and behaviors, rather than cultural fit.

It sounds like a total turnabout, but it's helped us continue positive growth with a great mix of employees.

*(Amanda Lannert, CEO, Jellyvision, Chicago, shared this success on Forbes)*



#### YOUR LEGAL COACH

#### Facebook recruiting is safe bet, right?

**Question:** Everyone is on Facebook, so it only makes sense to advertise our job openings there, right?

**Answer:** It might seem like it makes sense, but a recent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) ruling shows it could be a danger zone.

#### Called out

The EEOC called out several companies for unfair hiring practices for targeting men under the age of 30 with their employment announcements on Facebook. (The social media's platform allows for targeted advertising.)

Women and anyone over the age of 30 on Facebook couldn't see the job ads, which the EEOC said violated the Civil Rights Act and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

To steer clear of these issues, it's best to post jobs where any interested candidate can see and respond.

**Source:** [tinyurl.com/facebookads467](http://tinyurl.com/facebookads467)

#### LIGHTER SIDE

#### Not so hasty! Reasons to pause before hitting send

Email can become so overwhelming you make mistakes – like hitting send before you should.

Coburg Banks gathered these work email mistakes:

- "I sent a job application to my (ex)boss!"
- "I wrote: 'I hope that nasty little dog finally dies so we don't have to hear about it anymore!' intended for a colleague, but sent to my boss, *about her dog.*"
- "I asked the boss what he was cooking me for dinner. He has the same name as my husband."
- "I accidentally replied to all, complaining about the 'idiot' who kept replying to all."

**Source:** [tinyurl.com/mistakes644](http://tinyurl.com/mistakes644)

## COMMUNICATION NEWS

## Skills gap widens: Training that helps

Most managers struggle with a skills gap every day.

Two-thirds of management professionals say some or many of their employees don't have the right skills to do their jobs well.

That's up from about half of managers who said the skills gap was an issue last year. The major causes:

- changing technology, and
- shortage of qualified candidates.

### 3 strategies to tighten the gap

Experts suggest these strategies to tighten the gap:

- **Encourage employees to ask for training.** Many employees say they'd like to learn new skills but are reluctant to ask for training in fear of being seen as incompetent or unqualified.
  - **Give incentives for after-hour training.** Pay employees to attend extra training and offer incentives to get them to learn new skills without losing productivity.
  - **Engage your in-house experts.** Ask employees who are your best performers on the tasks you need covered to train others in after-hour or work-hour training.
- Source: HRDive, [tinyurl.com/skills467](http://tinyurl.com/skills467)*

## Need an important job done? Be careful about this approach

It's natural for managers to rely on one or two trusted staffers for more important jobs.

In most cases, that's the right way to go. These staffers are the most capable and they do the best work.

But there can be consequences of using the same go-to workers each and every time.

Two obvious problems are:

- **Stretching workers too thin.** Trusted staffers will still put in a good effort. But after a while, you may not get the same results if those workers are too overburdened.

- **Keeping other staffers from reaching their full potential.** You may never know what other workers are capable of if they don't get a chance to work on more important projects.

And here's the thing: Many staffers you rely on may not let you know if they're feeling overloaded.

There's nothing wrong with relying on trusted workers. But spreading out the workload to those who haven't proven themselves yet pays off in the long run.

## Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

No. Allison was allowed to sue both the company and Robert.

Robert's case was appealed several times, and lower courts ruled in his favor.

But a higher court ruled he was personally subject to liability under FMLA because he exercised "supervisory authority over the complaining employee and was responsible in whole or part for the alleged violation."

### Analysis: Avoid personal opinions in reviews, including on health

This suit shows the worst-case result of overstepping the FMLA.

Robert made a critical mistake when he brought up Allison's health as a factor in her performance. Even worse, he put it in her yearly review.

If someone's approved for leave under FMLA, she can't be penalized for absences. Instead give feedback on the employee's performance while she is at work.

It can be tricky to do – employees who are frequently out of the workplace can quickly fall behind. If you find yourself struggling, ask someone from HR to help.

(Based on *Haybarger v. Lawrence County Adult Probation & Parole*. Dramatized for effect.)

### Quotes

Opportunities don't happen, you create them.

– Chris Grosser

Champions keep playing until they get it right.

– Billy Jean King

It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation.

– Herman Melville

Those who want to succeed will find a way; those who don't will find an excuse.

– Leo Aguila

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