

Communication

Bulletin TM for Managers & Supervisors

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

March 15, 2021



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Communication at the root of productivity issues: 4 cures here

Quantity isn't the answer; quality is

Employees struggling to get things done? Or worse, do you ride the struggle bus, too?

When there are productivity issues, we tend to point fingers – at people, processes and policies that seem to be slacking.

We most certainly never point the fingers at ourselves. But researchers find the problems with getting quality work done on time aren't in *how or when we do them*.

It has more to do with *how we communicate before, during and after them*.

Quantity of communication isn't the answer – people still fall short, despite the plethora of communication channels we use every day.

Quality and consistency matter, says Daniel

Markovitz, author of *The Conclusion Trap*.

Here are four effective ways to communicate so everyone can be more productive:

Huddle in tiers

Many organizations and/or managers host daily huddles – brief group meetings where they cover the day's priorities, assignments and any information they need to share – remotely or in person. Markowitz suggests tiered huddles:

- Tier 1: Front-line employees meet at the start of the workday.
- Tier 2: Supervisors meet 30 minutes later.
- Tier 3: Managers meet 30 minutes after that.

Please see Communication ... on Page 2.

Sharpen Your Judgment

Stray comment, hard feelings lead to bias suit

"Looks like I got the short end of the stick again," said employee Eric Young.

"All the sticks are the same size," supervisor Ramona Richards said. "I think you're reading too much into this."

"We're realigning to meet business needs and everyone's roles will change, even those who've been doing the same thing for a long time."

"There you go again," said Eric. "Bringing up my 'longevity,' so to speak. I may be the most senior around here, but I'm not old."

"I didn't say you were old," Ramona said.

"As a matter of fact, you did," Eric said. "Just last week when you invited the team to coffee, you said 'The old guy probably needs

the pick-me-up most of all.'"

"A joke," Ramona said, "a dumb one, at that."

No joke to employee

"Well, I'm not joking when I say I see the correlation," Eric said.

"Consider me as the old guy, call me the old guy, give me a crappy, bound-to-fail assignment – and figure you can usher me out the door," he continued, "I won't let it happen."

Instead, Eric quit and sued, claiming age bias because he was humiliated and forced to leave.

The company fought the case. Did it 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.

Communication ...

(continued from Page 1)

- Tier 4: Directors or VPs meet 30 minutes later.
- Tier 5: Executives meet last.

This way, problems can be addressed at the lowest possible level, and if they can't be fixed, they're kicked up the line. It helps communication flow daily and keeps every level connected.

Make more work visible

Most people's work is buried in their computers and heads. Others don't know who's overwhelmed or ready to take on more at any given minute. That can lead to unnecessary status checks and excessive messaging.

To avoid that, Markowitz suggests using physical or virtual task boards. Try an app or post a large, easily seen white board. Add cards for each task, then specify who's handling it and the status. This eliminates time-wasting status checks via messages and in meetings.

Create your 'bat signal'

In fictional times of crisis, police call out to Batman for help by projecting his signature bat symbol in the sky. Try to implement a similar tool to help employees recognize the difference

between an issue and true emergency – and respond accordingly.

Without a “bat signal,” employees often waste time checking every digital platform (and even the grapevine) on issues that don't deserve the attention.

Set up a communication protocol to help everyone understand what needs attention when. For instance, for true emergencies, make calls and drop tasks. For less urgent issues, use Slack and expect responses within a half-day. For information sharing, use email and don't expect responses.

Align responsibility with authority

Productivity often drops when leaders assign tasks but don't give employees the authority to deliver results. When employees don't have autonomy, they become disengaged and won't focus on getting things done.

“If an employee is responsible for an outcome, they should have the authority to make the necessary decisions without being forced into an endless string of emails, meetings or presentations,” says Markovitz.

Give employees the training and authority to make low-risk decisions on their work. Ask them to seek advice and/or approvals on high-risk decisions.

Source: Daniel Markovitz, author of The Conclusion Trap in The Harvard Business Review, tinyurl.com/productivity496

TECH CORNER

3 tips to declutter tech – and bad habits it causes

Our technology can become a lot like an overstuffed and neglected closet. Eventually the dumping ground needs to be sorted through and decluttered.

Your technology needs it from time to time, too.

Take the time, take the lead

Here are tips to improve tech use:

- **Recycle.** Gather up old phones, laptops, tablets and cables. Delete all of your personal and professional data. Give them to IT or take them to your local recycling

drop spots to declutter.

- **Look for upgrades and alternatives.** Think your devices are too slow or can't hold enough data? Work with IT to find upgrades and alternatives. Since parts to build new products have become harder to find, many tech companies have created upgrades that fill the need.
- **Curb the social habit.** Social media can be helpful to connect personally and professionally. But it can be full of negative information and toxic talk. Try to limit your use to declutter your mind, too.

Source: The Irish Times, tinyurl.com/14sd2d76

COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

■ 2 minutes of this leads to a better day every day

Can you set aside two minutes every morning to ensure a better workday?

Of course, you can! And why wouldn't you if that's all it takes?

That's the same realization Neil Pasricha, author of *The Happiness Equation* and *The Book of Awesome*, had when he started researching ways to dig out of his work/life crisis. He found a three-question, little-time-investment exercise to make more of each day.

Just ask yourself these three questions, find the answers and capitalize on them for today:

- I will let go of ...
- I am grateful for ...
- I will focus on ...

It helps you put positive and productive things in perspective – and negative and unproductive things out of mind.

Source: tinyurl.com/2minutes497

■ Get the virtual watercooler feeling like the real one

In remote work, we've lost watercooler (coffee pot, local bar or whatever you call it) talk. Casual chats often led to the next great idea or the solution we never realized we needed.

So managers want to help recreate them. Leadership experts Karin Hurt and David Dye at Let's Grow Leaders came up with these two ideas:

- Create a standing watercooler room. Build it into the virtual platform you use most. Keep it open for employees to drop in when they want to say “Hi,” break from work and talk about whatever they want.
- Host quick parallel chats. Use breakout rooms to get creative, problem-solving ideas from a group of people. Prompt it with one question that starts, “How can we ... ?” to invite employees and get feedback.

Source: Let's Grow Leaders, tinyurl.com/watercooler496

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 Employees working too hard? Time to step in

Leaders like to see employees work hard and meet goals. They don't tend to think employees are working too hard.

But we did. Because of the coronavirus, almost all of our employees headed home to work for the bulk of 2020.

When we looked closer, we realized almost no one had taken any vacation days. At the C-level, no one took any.

We got it: During a pandemic, vacation destinations were limited. But taking time off isn't just about getting away to a dream destination. It's about recharging and de-stressing. Employees needed to do that, perhaps especially

in the face of all the new challenges the pandemic presented.

Mandate leads to realization

Enough was enough. We reminded employees of the toll overworking and stress can take on mental health. Then we encouraged them to use their vacation time.

We went so far as to mandate they take time off. But when they started to take a day here and there, they realized it was a good idea – and are now regularly de-stressing and recharging.

(Rob LaHayne, CEO, TouchCare, New York)

2 How we improve virtual onboarding

We never imagined a day when we'd hire new people, and they wouldn't step foot on-site to learn how to do their jobs.

But it's happened. In the wake of a pandemic, we had to evolve into an almost entirely remote workforce. And with that came virtual onboarding.

We transitioned almost everything we did – from meeting people and signing documents to learning policies and training for the job – to virtual.

It seemed to work. But we hoped we could make it matter.

Survey and focus groups

So we gave our first virtual onboarding “graduates” (and all others that have followed) a short online survey where they could rate different parts of the program and comment. We also follow up with focus groups for more informal chats on what virtual hires liked, didn't like and still need.

This helps us continually learn what we can improve as we move forward.

(Kelly Chuck, Associate Learning Partner, LinkedIn, shared this success on LinkedIn)

3 Tips to build trust with employees

In times of uncertainty, there's nothing better than trust between managers and employees.

It helps everyone get through it with a higher level of ease and certainty.

We wanted to help managers who weren't great communicators build deeper trust with employees.

Share what you don't know, too

We gave them these three tips:

- **Show up authentically.** One way is to give timely responses. It shows you listen, even if it's a brief comment on a thread within your communication app or an email that says, “I'm looking into this.”
- **Be conscious of how you show up.** Relate to people in the environment they're working or comfortable in.
- **Be transparent.** It's just as important to tell them what you don't know or don't have as it is to tell them what you know and have.

(Jo McRell, Diversity & Inclusion Lead, Facebook, shared this success in an HRMorning.com masterclass)



YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ She doesn't want to work on-site: Can we force her?

Question: An employee insists she can do her job just as well from home as she does on-site. Quite honestly, she can. But we expect everyone to work on-site. Can we force her?

Answer: Yes, but you may not want to, says Ashley Steiner Kelly, partner and general counsel at Arnall, Golden, Gregory, LLP.

Be interactive

Let's say, the employee has a confirmed disability and makes a reasonable request under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Then you'll need to engage in the interactive process to explore accommodations you can make to enable her to do the job, Kelly says.

You can ask for information from her healthcare provider – and may find a reasonable accommodation is to continue to work remotely, especially if she's already doing the work effectively.

Source: tinyurl.com/workonsite498

LIGHTER SIDE

■ Who would've thought? Facts that seem improbable

Who would've thought many of us would work from home for close to year? Who would've thought we could actually do it?

There are many realities today we would've never imagined possible. But anything is possible, right? After all:

- Sweden's famous Icehotel (and others like it) have smoke detectors.
- The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous asked for whiskey on his deathbed (but, maybe not as improbable, was denied by the nurse).
- The Father of Traffic Safety, William Eno, invented the stop sign, speed limit, traffic circle and one-way street, but never drove a vehicle.

Source: Reader's Digest.

COMMUNICATION NEWS

Employees burned out: Know the signs

Almost 70% of remote employees experienced burnout symptoms while working from home during COVID-19, a recent *Monster.com* survey found.

That's not too surprising until you consider it's a 35% increase since early May!

To help employees deal with the newfound stress, managers need to know the signs.

Telltale signs

Employees under excess stress:

- **Avoid work.** Output drops and they don't respond during agreed-on, regular hours.
- **Perform less.** They miss goals and don't

produce the same quality of work.

- **Become apathetic.** They aren't interested in their work, team, company, clients, etc.
- **Don't take time off.** Some employees go to the extreme other side of avoiding work.
- **Are irritable.** They get irritated by colleagues, family members or any interruption.
- **Indicate hopelessness, worry or sadness.** They notably aren't as pleasant or cheerful as they once were.

If you recognize these symptoms, it's time to step in, discuss workload, personal feelings and what you can do to help.

Source: tinyurl.com/stressed496

How Zoom levels the playing field for many

Before the pandemic, most employees only dabbled in virtual meetings – such as on Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Workplace from Facebook, etc.

Fortunately, now we're all experts because virtual meetings leveled a playing field many employers didn't recognize existed.

People who worked remotely prior to the pandemic felt marginalized.

No one asked for their insight and most telecommuters felt professionally and socially isolated, a USC study found.

Now they have a consistent seat and voice at the table – and managers want to help them continue to get it.

2 important guidelines

Here's how to include everyone:

- Continue to facilitate virtual meetings if just one person can't make it to the actual meeting space
- Don't meet virtually just because you can. Meet because it means something.

Source: tinyurl.com/telecommuters496

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

Yes, the company won when a judge dismissed the case.

The employee's attorney claimed Eric was a victim of age bias because his boss referred to his age, specifically calling him "the old guy." Then the boss gave the employee a less-than-desirable job assignment, which amounted to an adverse action.

The company's attorney argued the manager was only guilty of a single, stray remark that didn't amount to anything more than a poor choice.

Furthermore, the attorney argued, the so-called adverse action was a matter of business realignment. It may have bruised the employee's ego, but it wasn't intentionally adverse.

The court agreed, noting, "simply because an employee is made unhappy by an action does not mean that he has identified an adverse employment action."

Avoid discrimination issues

You can't always give employees the assignments they think they deserve, but you can lessen issues by focusing on business needs. And you *always* want to avoid referencing age, race, religion, sexual orientation – or anything that could be considered bias under Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) laws.

(Based on *Zivkovic v. Juniper Networks Inc.* Dramatized for effect.)

Quotes

You've got to try your luck at least once a day because you could be going around lucky all day and not even know it.

– Jimmy Dean

The slickest way in the world to lie is to tell the right amount of truth at the right time – and then shut up.

– Robert Heinlein

The secret of success is an absolute ungovernable curiosity.

– Larry King

EDITOR
MICHELE MCGOVERN
mmcgovern@pbp.com

MANAGING EDITOR:
RENEE COCCHI
rcocchi@pbp.com

PRODUCTION EDITOR:
JEN ERB

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR:
CURT BROWN

Subscriptions: 800-220-5000

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