

Communication

Bulletin TM for Managers & Supervisors

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

June 1, 2021



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What NOT to say at work: Is that a fair communication policy?

A recent decision around this topic proves major backlash

Would you ever tell your employee to “Just shut up”?

One company put limits on what employees could talk about in the workplace, essentially banning many sensitive topics.

It led to praise, outcry, resignations and lots of banter outside the company.

What happened

Software company Basecamp CEO Jason Fried wrote in a company blog post: “No more societal and political discussions ...”

He said those types of conversations are “a major distraction. It saps our energy, and redirects our dialog toward dark places.”

But he didn't deny employees opportunities to express their opinions completely.

Fried also encouraged employees to “continue these difficult discussions with willing colleagues on other systems,” and “exercise your right to activism and political engagement outside of work.”

What to ask ourselves

Some people loved it. Some hated it.

Either way, it presents communication questions for leaders everywhere:

- Can you ban what employees talk about?
- Is there a practical way to keep

Please see Policy ... on Page 2.

Sharpen Your Judgment

Boss needs communicator – and he's not

“I needed someone who communicates and interacts well with others,” said Manager GERALYN HUGHES. “And those aren't your strong points. I think you'd agree.”

“I would *not* agree,” said Ronny Anders.

“But apparently Seth and Gina agreed. I heard you were asking them what they thought of me,” he continued.

“That's true,” GERALYN said. “When I'm considering candidates for a promotion I need a 360-degree view. Sometimes I get insight from those who work with them the most.”

“They aren't the only people I work with, but they certainly are the worst,” Ronny said.

“They think it's funny when they call me

‘Rusty Ronny’ and ‘old man.’”

“I told them that's not acceptable, but it has no bearing on my hiring decision,” GERALYN said.

“I might not have thought so either until you decided on a candidate about half my age,” Ronny said.

“I'm starting to think you might see me as a bit ‘rusty,’ too. And this ‘doesn't communicates well with others’ is a guise.”

Sued for age discrimination

Ronny took that thought to an attorney, who agreed with him and sued the company, claiming age discrimination.

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.

Policy ...

(continued from Page 1)

communication civil?

Yes, you can ban conversations about certain subjects. But you can't expect that discussions won't happen.

Employees are human, and they talk about things that matter to them. It may not happen intentionally, but one comment leads to another.

For instance, and as one Basecamp employee questioned: What happens if I bring up my kids' school and it leads to a chat about the elected school board? Is that then a political conversation?

Encourage better conversations

Generally, leaders have to be careful about limiting what employees discuss or how they communicate. The National Labor Relations Act protects some types of speech. At the same time, there's no right to free speech in private workplaces. The First Amendment doesn't apply there.

And practically speaking, *employees don't like to work where they're micromanaged.*

"Without diversity of thought, what do you have?" says Ryan Denehy, CEO of Electric.

Instead of restrictions, leaders want

to encourage and give tips on how to have workplace conversations that are:

- **Respectful.** Take time to listen to and consider others' views. Give them space and opportunities to share insights. Ask for clarification and data points to increase understanding – not to question others' thinking.
- **Calculated.** It's critical to control emotions when talking about sensitive subjects. Avoid impulsive or emotional responses. Try counting to five or 10 before responding.
- **Timely.** Most subjects and issues pass as others rise. Employees want to avoid rehashing things that can't be changed. It wastes time, thought and goodwill.
- **Fluid.** Employees won't likely solve the sensitive issues – such as the political and societal ones Basecamp banned – that come up. Sensitive issues aren't clear cut. Employees want to accept where colleagues stand as much as they want to be respected for where they stand – especially as time and attitudes change.
- **Agreeable.** Recognize when you're at a sticking point – and agree to disagree. It's OK to have different views on issues. It's not OK to only see yours as the right one.

Sources: tinyurl.com/basecamp501; tinyurl.com/rules501; and electric.ai

TECH CORNER

4 ways to solve your computer speed issues

Lost in a daydream waiting for something to download? Cursing at your computer because it takes too long to boot up or load a web page?

You have speed issues. And now that so many people work from home part of the time, it's only getting worse.

Fortunately, there are solutions beyond cursing or upgrading your connections.

Make a switch

To improve download speeds:

- **Reboot your router.** It seems simple,

but doing it every few days can make a world of difference.

- **Update your router's firmware.** This can address bugs or quirks in the network that have crept in.
- **Try a factory reset on your router.** You'll need to set up Wi-Fi again, but that only takes a few minutes.
- **Switch to the Ethernet cable.** Plug your computer directly into one of the router's Ethernet ports when you need to download big or many documents. Just make sure you use a modern Ethernet cable (Cat 5E or Cat 6).

Source: tinyurl.com/speed501

COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

■ Skip the Feedback Sandwich: Get to the meat

Many leaders try to soften negative feedback or bad news with the Feedback Sandwich: Positive comment, negative comment, positive comment.

Employees are often left loving the soft bread and missing the "meat" of the matter – what they really need to fix.

Avoid the Feedback Sandwich. Instead, use this three-piece approach:

- **Describe the behavior you want to correct or enforce.** Be specific. "You interrupted our client three times." "You were late 11 mornings this month." "You exceeded your daily goal every day this week!"
- **Explain the impact.** People don't always see what's at stake. Say, "You missed a chance to understand the client's needs." "Employees with tardy records aren't recommended for raises." "You're on target to get this month's bonus!"
- **Describe what must be done now.** "Please make notes, and talk when the client is done speaking." "Punch in on time or early." "Maintain your call cadence and motivation level!"

Source: tinyurl.com/sandwich501

■ 3 reasons we all need to lean toward kindness

Kindness at work isn't just a nice thing to have. It can help improve performance. If leaders consciously practice kindness, others will, too, says Joan Elmore, author of *As Its People: A 90-Day Challenge*. Kind words and gestures will:

- **Motivate.** People feel good after someone helps or gives them a compliment – and that immediately boosts their morale.
- **Give meaning.** When managers and employees compliment each others' efforts, recipients see the impact they have on others.
- **Increase confidence.** People perform better when they know colleagues are confident in their abilities. Asking for advice and sharing successes boosts confidence all around.

Source: tinyurl.com/kindness502

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 ‘Global Day of Rest’ helps employees disconnect

Our teams developed some bad work habits at home during the pandemic – and they’re probably not the kind you’re thinking.

They’d work through lunchtime, plan and attend too many meetings and jam-pack their days by taking on more.

We could see some getting overwhelmed and burned out – even if they didn’t see it or denied it.

Share what you’ve done

It was time for leadership to step in and encourage employees to step back.

We called for one Global Day of

Rest per quarter. No one was to log in or otherwise work.

Instead, we encouraged them to go out, do something they love and show or tell us about it on our internal social channels.

It’s been a great success. Employees love sharing their fun day, and we know they’re getting a much-deserved break from work.

(Ann Powell Executive VP & HR Officer, Bristol Myers Squibb, spoke at The Conference Board’s Organizational Impact on Social Change Issues online conference)

2 Meetings work – if short, meaningful

We know, we know – no one wants to hear there’s another meeting.

But a lot can be lost in the shuffle if people don’t talk, share and interact often enough.

Of course, it’s not always easy to convince employees we need to meet often – and in our case, daily – especially when they were working from home.

Discuss goals and obstacles

To get buy-in, we promised meetings would be short and meaningful. In the morning, we’d go over goals and potential impediments. In the afternoon, we’d meet just as quickly to cover what was accomplished and what held back people.

As leaders kept promises to be brief, buy-in grew. And when people recognized the meetings helped them maintain momentum, they were even more inclined to engage.

We keep it short, simple and effective – and it’s made meetings more than bearable.

(Mark Hobbs, CEO, Fundmetric Inc., Halifax, Canada, on Forbes.com)

3 Helping hardest-hit employees thrive

All of our employees were impacted by the pandemic and ensuing business shutdowns. We wanted to help them all through it, while ensuring our business continued to serve customers.

We found in doing that, one group of employees was hardest hit: our customer service professionals. They were sent home (to keep them safe) but they still worked long hours under stressful situations, which created a work-life imbalance.

Experts on hand

So first we gave them a cash bonus.

Then we hosted calls with medical and psychological experts who could answer questions and hear concerns.

On a more personal level, executives held weekly seminars to address topics ranging from the virus to the company’s condition.

It helped put our employees at a bit more ease, knowing they had resources and outlets to get them through the trying times.

(Margaret Keane, CEO, Synchrony, Stamford, CT)



YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ She wants a lateral transfer, and I can’t give it

Question: I couldn’t give a lateral transfer to an employee who requested one. She’s grumbled that the decision is discriminatory. Does she have grounds to sue?

Answer: Not really, said employment law attorney Fiona Ong with Shawe Rosenthal LLP.

Recent ruling helps

A recent D.C. Circuit Court helped explain. The court said employees must show they suffered an adverse employment action to be the victim of discrimination. A denied lateral transfer – with no change in pay or benefits – doesn’t constitute an adverse action.

Your employee might have preferred the other position, but she still has the same pay and benefits.

Nothing changed, Ong noted. So she didn’t suffer and doesn’t have grounds to sue.

Sources: HRMorning.com and tinyurl.com/transfer501

LIGHTER SIDE

■ When everything stinks, optimists to the rescue

There’s a pandemic. The economy limps along. We’re socially distanced.

What’s there to be optimistic about?

Plenty, says the Optimists International Club, despite losing membership, but never hope.

The worldwide organization survived 110 years, two pandemics, two world wars, a Great Depression, Great Recession and countless miseries and disasters. They’ve succeeded by doing little more than continuing to look on the bright side.

In fact, this year’s theme is something we could all use more often: “Choose Optimism.”

Source: tinyurl.com/optimists501

COMMUNICATION NEWS

Employees hit ‘Pandemic Wall’: How to help

More employees hit the “Pandemic Wall” every day.

It’s the feeling of utter fatigue – much like marathoners hitting the runner’s wall, when they feel like they can’t go on in the race.

For employees, they’re beyond burned out. They’re nearly paralyzed by the nonstop work, homeschooling, isolation and worry.

Give them the push

The good news is most runners power through the wall and are rewarded with a finish. And you can help employees push through their wall.

- **Change perceptions.** “Encourage people to participate in your wellness options, which is positive. Get away from the notion of treatment, which can be negative,” says Terri Patterson, principal at Control Risks, a crisis and security consulting practice.
- **Eliminate chronic uncertainty.** With so many uncertainties in employees’ personal lives, cut them a break at work. Give details on company progress at a regular cadence. Connect with employees at least once a week face to face (even if that’s video). Give and get updates so employees know where they stand and where they’re headed.

Source: HRMorning, tinyurl.com/Wall501

Why people don’t speak up when they witness wrongdoing

Something could be seriously wrong on your team, and you may never know it. Or you might find out too late.

Many people don’t speak up when they see wrongdoing – and that can hurt teams, morale and entire organizations.

Why don’t people speak up – particularly when they witness immoral, unethical or downright criminal behavior? They’re afraid of repercussions, according to Harvard Business School research. It’s a real fear: One study found 80% of whistleblowers get harassed and 60% lose their jobs.

You don’t want bad behavior swept under the rug.

2 tactics

To encourage people to speak up:

- **Reframe.** Tell the team silence is “everyone’s problem.” Speaking up is the shared goal because “you’re all in it together.”
- **Share stories of courage.** No need to name names, but share positive outcomes from times people spoke up against wrongdoing.

Source: tinyurl.com/speakup501

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

No. The company lost this one.

The employee’s attorney claimed he was a victim of age discrimination because colleagues had made fun of him for his age and his boss knew it. Even worse, the boss asked the offending employees for opinions in the hiring decision. Then the manager hired a younger person for the position.

The company’s attorney argued the employee was passed over for the promotion for one valid reason: He didn’t communicate and interact with others well – and that position required someone who could do both.

The court didn’t see it that way. Instead, it felt the manager’s decision to get input from people

who’d made derogatory remarks about the candidate was questionable enough to make age discrimination a factor. It didn’t appear to be a fair, unbiased hiring decision, the court said.

Stop bias

The big issue in this case: The manager gave some hiring authority (by asking for opinions) to people who’d already proven bias.

Managers can’t tolerate discriminatory behavior – and they certainly can’t ever get people who’ve committed it involved in decisions.

(Based on *Beechman v. Wyndham Vacation Resorts Inc.* Dramatized for effect.)

Quotes

We either make ourselves miserable or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.

– Carlos Castaneda

Hope is bold. It can look beyond personal convenience and open us up to grand ideals that make life beautiful and worthwhile.

– Pope Francis

People can’t drive you crazy if you don’t give them the keys.

– Mike Bechtle

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