

# 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.

April 1, 2022



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## How to connect teams in a disconnected workplace

### Time to get the band back together

Employees and whole teams feel more disconnected than ever – even as they come back to work on-site.

First, the pandemic sent them all home. Now, many people work fewer – or no – hours on-site. Plus, some teammates have left for other – or no – jobs. Employees have lost the workplace connections they once cherished.

The good news: You don't necessarily need to get the band back together to make the band *feel* like they're back together.

"The antidote to workplace disconnection is promoting friendship and meaningful connection at work," says Adam Smiley Poswolsky, author of *Friendship in the Age of Loneliness: An Optimist's Guide to Connection*

in his Harvard Business School research. "A 2019 report ... found that building close relationships with colleagues was the most important factor in determining job satisfaction by 77% of respondents."

To help foster connections in the workplace, Poswolsky suggests these four strategies:

### Create connection rituals

It's more difficult to connect on a whim these days. People aren't around each other as often as they were before the pandemic.

So leaders and employees will want to create new – or revive old – rituals that get people together in some sense.

Please see *Connect ...* on Page 2.

### Sharpen Your Judgment

## Boss wants documents; worker claims ADA bias

"We're looking forward to getting you back to work," said Manager Les Stevens. "As soon as we get your doctor's clearance, plus the other medical documents we asked for, you'll be set."

"No problem," said Zach Andrews. "This ankle tear has been a real 'Achilles Heel' for me!"

"We miss that sense of humor on the floor," Les said. "Remember, safety is the No. 1 priority, so let's get everything in order."

"I need the doctor's note, plus all the documentation on those meds I asked you about before the injury."

"That, too? Still?" Zach said.

"Yes, our work presents some hazards so we need to make sure everyone is fit to handle

them," Les said. "No hurry. But before you come back, please."

Zach turned in some medical notes – a clearance to work with no restrictions and some notes on his prescription drugs.

### Not enough or too much documentation?

"That's not everything we asked for," Les explained. "Unless you give us all the records we need to determine if you're fit to work, we can't let you work."

When Zach was let go, he felt it was a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

He sued, and 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.

## Connect ...

(continued from Page 1)

Poswolsky points to research on friendship, which needs “three things to thrive: positivity, so we can feel satisfied; vulnerability, so we can feel safe; and consistency, so we can feel seen.”

Try consistent connection rituals that include praise and appreciation. For instance, institute Gratitude Mondays. Employees can start the week sharing something they’re grateful for. At the other end, try Storytelling Fridays, when they can share personal triumphs.

### Make it easy to get, give support

Most people give help when they’re asked. In fact, most people feel great about helping colleagues. Kindness and generosity of time and talent builds connections. So make it easier for employees to get and give support.

One way: Try Reciprocity Rings (coined by organizational psychologist Adam Grant). Get together with your team (in-person or via Zoom) monthly or quarterly so everyone can share something they’re struggling with.

Then the rest of the group might be able to offer ideas, new contacts or resources that wouldn’t have come up if the conversation was never facilitated.

You might even keep a spreadsheet

or an app that helps everyone stay connected on the issue, offer encouragement and congratulations when the struggle eases.

### Encourage personable breaks

Employees need to disconnect from work to maintain their well-being.

“For human connection and friendship to thrive, we need to take employee health seriously,” says Poswolsky.

Leaders can set the bar for employees at work by designating “work-free hours.” That way, no one feels compelled to work outside the norms.

Encourage more phone calls and in-person conversations at work to reduce loneliness and improve communication. Remind employees to use breaks to phone a friend, take a walk with a co-worker or play a board game.

### Start early

Onboarding is the first opportunity leaders have to facilitate friendships and connections at work. Don’t squander it.

Amp up new employees’ – especially those hired remotely – opportunities to interact with each other and new colleagues.

**Source:** Harvard Business Review, [tinyurl.com/connect521](https://tinyurl.com/connect521); [smileyposwolsky.com](https://smileyposwolsky.com)

## TECH CORNER

### 4 tactics for better work at home

More people than ever work from home. Whether you or your team members do it full- or part-time, you want to be safe and efficient.

#### Set the standard

Here are four tips to help everyone get more done – and without risks – when working from home:

- **Check your bandwidth.** If others in your home are using devices, you’ll be stretched for enough bandwidth. You (or they) can cut down on the pull by using your phone for audio and avoiding video calls.

- **When you do video calls, try a conferencing speakerphone.** It’s more reliable than your monitor’s camera mic, and it cuts out background noise and picks up your voice better.
- **Back up desktop files more often** to avoid cyber attacks.
- **When in doubt, pull the plug.** Many technology pros admit that sometimes it’s faster to turn your device off and on than it is to troubleshoot. This is particularly effective with single purpose machines such as routers, firewalls and coffee makers!

**Source:** Forbes Technology Council, [tinyurl.com/safety518](https://tinyurl.com/safety518)

## COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

### ■ Leadership lessons from a rock climber

Shani Magosky literally got stuck between a rock and a hard place. The rock climber and experienced leadership consultant took a wrong turn in the Blue Ridge Mountains and ended up in a life-threatening situation. Fortunately, she got out of it – and realized the steps she took to save herself are ideal for any “Oh, crap!” situation at work.

Magosky’s plan when you get in a tricky situation:

**1. Don’t panic.** Do all you can to clear your head and evaluate options.

**2. Put safety measures in place once you choose the solution.** In rock climbing, you tie knots. At work, ask yourself, “If the worst happens, what do I need in place to overcome and succeed?”

**3. Communicate constantly.** On the rock, she had a climbing partner who helped brainstorm options. At work, you also want a go-to person you can ask for feedback and honesty.

**4. Get the right training.** Magosky wasn’t a complete novice. She took a rescue course. She was trained to overcome obstacles. Same goes for work. Seek training opportunities to become agile and decisive.

**Source:** [tinyurl.com/climb521](https://tinyurl.com/climb521)

### ■ Ask this question when you’re stuck for a solution

When you’re deciding the best route when facing the proverbial fork in the road (one that’s not quite as critical as we discussed above), ask yourself this one question: *What would I tell my best friend to do?*

According to Daniel Pink, host of The Pinkcast, “The reason this works is that human beings are problem solvers. But we tend to stink at solving our own problems. When we confront our own issues, we’re way too enmeshed in the details.”

Take the step back, find the advice you’d give a friend – and follow it!

**Source:** [tinyurl.com/bestfriend521](https://tinyurl.com/bestfriend521)

## 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 ‘Farming for Dissent’ helps us avoid mistakes

It wasn’t until after I’d made a big business mistake that I heard from colleagues and other trusted advisors that they thought early on it would be a big business mistake.

“Why didn’t you say so?” I asked many of them. Generally, they figured I knew what I was doing and questioned their authority to disagree with me. The worst part: Several people felt it would be a failure and they didn’t know others did, too.

#### Write exactly what you think

I had to change this fear of disagreement and silence. I called it

“Farming for Dissent” and I included it in all major decisions.

Everyone who is involved in a decision has to write in a public, shared document how they feel about the idea we’re considering.

They’re encouraged to pass judgment, tear apart ideas, offer new solutions – and even compliment the good ideas!

This has helped us avoid major mistakes and small stumbles.

*(Reed Hastings, CEO, Netflix, shared this success on the Freakonomics Radio Book Club)*

### 2 How we make good decisions quickly

If leaders mull decisions too long, they put a lot at risk – progress, reaching goals, getting ahead of the competition, etc. And if they wait a few weeks, the entire landscape of the situation may change.

I didn’t want to mull anything longer than necessary. And I didn’t want my other managers to fall in that trap either.

#### Assess and recommend

So I started to encourage my people to come to me once they assessed the situation and had a recommendation on what to do. That forced all of us to really examine what was wrong and what needed to be done. Then, most importantly, quickly whittle down a few solutions to the one that should have the most impact.

We can assess progress as we move forward and figure out if anything should be changed, rather than wait out a decision to do anything.

*(Thomas Costabile, Executive Director/CEO, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, shared this success on LinkedIn)*

### 3 ‘8 Truths’: How we set the right expectations

We had recurring issues in our department we couldn’t seem to fix – such as failures to share information, recognize accomplishments and learn from mistakes.

We sat together over a series of meetings and tried to hash them out, but we never found more than a temporary fix.

That prompted us to dig deeper to the root of our problems. We asked the team why they thought we had the issues. And they all had different ideas.

That was the light bulb moment!

#### Set starting and ending points

Our problems were about expectations. We never established a core set so everyone was working toward the same goals with the same expectations on how to get there.

So we worked together on our “8 Truths” – outlining the expectations of working in our fast-paced industry. With a clear starting and ending point, we overcame recurring problems.

*(Ron DeFeo, Chief Communications Officer, American Airlines, Fort Worth, TX)*



### YOUR LEGAL COACH

#### ■ Do we have to pay salaried employees overtime pay?

**Question:** A salaried employee recently complained that he’s been working a lot more than 40 hours a week and wants overtime pay. Do we have to pay salaried employees OT?

**Answer:** It’s commonly thought that salaried employees are exempt from OT, say employment law attorneys Jennifer Prozinski and Karel Mazanec from the firm Veneable LLP. That’s not always the case.

In general, exempt employees earn a predetermined amount that doesn’t fluctuate and is at least \$35,568 annually. But that isn’t the only factor in figuring out OT. To be exempt, salaried employees must also do executive, administrative or professional work. That includes, but isn’t limited to:

- managing a few people
- performing office/non-manual work
- possessing hiring/firing power, and
- doing work that demands advanced knowledge.

**Source:** [tinyurl.com/overtimepay521](https://tinyurl.com/overtimepay521)

### LIGHTER SIDE

#### ■ One letter makes all the difference for this town

Residents in Plover, WI, loved their town and their name.

That is until painters hired to revamp the village’s water tower with the town name messed up. They accidentally reversed the two template letters, resulting in a welcome to “Plvoer.”

#### Residents lvoe it

Most residents weren’t up in arms over the Plover mistake. Instead, they took to social media, claiming:

- “Lvoe it!”
- “Big lvoer of it!”

Despite the good humor, the village administrator said the apologetic painters had it fixed within a week.

**Source:** Stevens Point Journal.

COMMUNICATION NEWS

# After-hours communication: What to avoid

Should you contact employees outside of normal work hours?

Seems like that question needs to be qualified with this question: What are normal work hours?

The pandemic – and ensuing remote work arrangements – blurred the lines between work and life. And that’s where the problem with work communication lays.

Almost 70% of employees say their employer contacted them outside normal work hours at least once a week, according to a Skynova survey. A third of employees say it should be illegal to call, text or email outside of normal hours, and nearly half say

it’s a fine-worthy infraction of workplace communication protocols!

## 2 tips for timely communication

Bottom line: It’s not a great idea to contact and expect answers from employees after designated work hours. Instead:

- If you work odd hours, add a line to your signature saying, “I may not work the same hours as you, and that’s OK. Please respond during *your* normal work hours,” and
- Use communication apps to delay your sends until normal operating hours.

Source: [tinyurl.com/afterhours521](https://tinyurl.com/afterhours521)

## Who your loneliest employees are – and how to help them

Who are your loneliest employees – and how can you help them?

Gallup researchers recently looked at these questions in light of changes in actual work locations. The answer (perhaps not surprisingly) is that it’s your 100% full-time remote employees.

### Still feel isolated

Two years into the pandemic, and even with adjustments to make remote work better, employees at home still feel isolated.

Here are a couple of tactics to help remote employees feel less isolated and lonely:

- **Focus on their strengths.** Employees who are aware of their strengths and able to share and leverage them are less likely to feel lonely, researchers found, and
- **Foster friendships.** Employees don’t leave human nature behind when they’re on the job. They still crave connection at work, regardless if it’s on Zoom or in person. Give them time to socialize.

Source: [tinyurl.com/lonely521](https://tinyurl.com/lonely521)

## Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

Yes. The company won when an appeals court agreed with a lower court’s ruling in its favor.

The employee’s attorney claimed he was the victim of ADA discrimination. The company knew he had a disability – his injury – and made improper requests for medical records around that and other, previous health issues. Then the company fired him because of the disability, the employee’s attorney claimed.

The company’s attorney argued the manager had a business need to request the medical documents: They needed proof the employee could do his job safely. All employees in roles that presented hazards were required to submit medical documents to prove their ability to work safely. Asking for the documents, and firing the

employee when he didn’t provide the necessary information, were legal under the ADA, the attorney said.

And the court agreed with that.

### Med document requests OK sometimes

The court said the document requests were consistent with the ADA because they were job-related and in line with business safety protocols. In safety-sensitive work, it’s usually OK to ask for medical proof that employees are fit to work. Managers want to work with HR to stay in compliance.

(Based on *Coffey v. Norfolk Southern Railway Co.* Dramatized for effect.)

## Quotes

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.

– John Quincy Adams

Happiness is not a goal ... it’s a by-product of a life well-lived.

– Eleanor Roosevelt

Acceptance of prevailing standards often means we have no standards of our own.

– Jean Toomer

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