

Face Uncertainty through Dialogue

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Mergers, acquisitions, restructuring, reengineering, downsizing and outsourcing are ongoing as companies work to stay ahead of the competition; these are unfortunate realities of business life. Leaders struggle to keep employees focused and productive through the turmoil and ambiguity. Facing uncertain futures themselves, many leaders find it challenging to coach, mentor and empower others during times of change. They want to do the “right” thing, but are often confused about how or what to say or do.

Communication Basics

While senior leaders may choose to have large town hall meetings or email blasts to make announcements about changes impacting the enterprise, it is important to allow for dialogue among employees in small group settings. In fact, direct dialogue is what employees consistently say they prefer, yet what is least often provided during the transition when major changes are announced.

While some leaders say that “business isn’t personal,” when it comes to your people, the best leaders know that it is. Employee engagement tops the list for what is most critical when implementing business strategies for lasting change—and engagement is very personal!

Employees want and need meaningful conversations with their managers and their manager’s Managers. These conversations have a direct impact on employee engagement and an organization’s bottom line. While low-tech, conversations are imperative for building trust and aligning widespread support for a new direction. To be most successful, leaders need a strategy to communicate effectively with employees at all organization levels and in all locations consistently.

Rather than high tech communication devices, video updates or glossy publications, simple face-to-face communication between leaders and their direct reports solidifies support. The first change message may come from the CEO at a single location with distribution to all employees at the same time. Then, to understand the impact of the change on themselves, employees want to learn more directly from their own supervisors.

Actions to Take Now

Especially during times of change, it is important for leaders to have a communication plan. Here are five action steps you can begin today to ensure that your communication is effective and builds engagement and commitment from your employees.

1. **Schedule regular meetings with your team.** Take out your calendar and write in times for staff team meetings. And, even if working with a virtual team, find ways to engage them and to schedule, when possible, periodic face to face team meetings. Treat these meetings like any other business appointment or deadline. Make them a priority. Resolve not to cancel or reschedule if something more important comes up. Nothing is more important than regular communication!
2. **Be authentic.** Employees trust only when their supervisor is direct and honest. Straight talk means presenting the good news and the bad, answering difficult questions, discussing issues you would prefer not to deal with, and saying “I don’t know.” To stay authentic regardless of the situation takes discipline and courage. If you are uncomfortable in informal and/or formal presentations/discussions with your team, get help. Ask a colleague who has skills you admire for pointers, get coaching or find a resource who can offer advice.
3. **Relate your communication to business goals and their concerns.** Your team meeting should focus on educating employees about new developments, issues that are important to the organization, and management decisions. Topics should be future oriented to stay ahead of the grapevine. You must address what is about to happen, not what happened last week. This is your chance to set the stage, ensure accuracy and engage employees in the process. When information comes first (or only) from the grapevine, leaders lose credibility. Employees form opinions that influence their work behavior and productivity only from what they hear first.
4. **Make a long-term communication commitment.** Leaders often stop change communication efforts too soon. Improvements in understanding, morale, and productivity probably won’t show up right away. In fact, initial reactions from your staff might be disappointing; leaders need to **remain committed even when immediate results are discouraging**. At first, employees might react to your communication efforts with skeptical silence and fail to ask questions, make comments, or provide any kind of feedback. This initial response is perfectly understandable. People often distrust the new and unfamiliar, particularly novel efforts to communicate. Have faith that response will improve. Once people realize that the leader is serious about keeping them informed, is genuinely listening to their ideas, and is being as honest as possible, they will begin to focus on what is most important.
5. **Offer opportunities for questions and feedback.** Just because you’ve said it before doesn’t mean everyone understands. It takes time for people to digest information, especially if the information is unfamiliar or from a new source. Leaders must consider their employees’ points of view, become comfortable with asking open-ended questions and allowing for silence to provide plenty of opportunities for team members to digest the information, make

comments, express disagreement and ask their own questions. Leaders who are uncomfortable with silence tend to monopolize the conversation and leaders who are uncomfortable with disagreement often become defensive. The goal is to get others talking and for the leader to demonstrate understanding (not necessarily agreement) of employees' points of view. When employees feel heard, they will feel more comfortable expressing their opinions and concerns.

It is often difficult to know how and what to communicate during times of change. The key is to help employees manage the transition well and for leaders to create a safe environment, provide consistent communication and effective dialogue that engages employees in conversation. To gain support for a change, employees must feel safe to express their thoughts honestly, even when they disagree. Communication is a challenge, especially during times of dynamic, changing business environments. To meet the challenge, prepare for and face uncertainty through dialogue.

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