

## The Communication Challenge: Employee Engagement

Kittie Watson

Merger, acquisition, reorganization, reengineering, downsizing, outsourcing, ongoing change to stay ahead of the competition—these are the facts of business life. How do we keep our employees focused and productive through the turmoil? We coach, we mentor, we empower, we form teams, we improve processes. We do all these things, and we still hear complaints from employees who are unengaged. What more can we do?

### Communicate for Commitment

The answer is fairly obvious. We build loyalty and enhance performance by communicating effectively with all employees at all levels in all locations.

“But,” you say, “we do communicate. We’re always in touch. We have e-mail, voice mail, cell phones, videos, electronic bulletin boards, company TV shows.”

The communication we’re talking about does not rely on any of these high tech communication devices. Or on glossy publications. We’re talking about simply the face-to-face communication between the supervisor and his/her direct report focusing on the state of the business. It’s the kind of communication employees consistently say they prefer. They want to learn about the organization and hear the news directly from their own supervisor.

### Take Action Now

Here are 8 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 a special team meeting every 6 to 8 weeks throughout the year. Treat this appointment like any other business appointment or deadline. Make it a priority. Resolve not to cancel or reschedule if something more important comes up. Nothing is more important than regular face-to-face communication!
2. **Prepare to be authentic.** You want to build trust and commitment with your people. Employee trust will develop only when the boss talks straight. 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.”

3. **Get the training you need.** If you are really uncomfortable in informal and/or formal presentations/discussions with your team, get training. Perhaps a presentation or communication skills workshop would help. Maybe you should join Toastmasters. Or get some coaching from a colleague whose skills you admire.
4. **Relate your communication effort to business goals and management concerns.** Your special team meeting should focus on educating employees about the business, about issues that are important to the organization, and about management decisions. Topics should be future oriented to stay ahead of the grapevine. You must address what's about to happen, not what happened last week. We cannot expect high performance and productivity improvement from people who don't know one of our plants is in danger of closing. This is your chance to give your side of the story. If all important information comes first (or only) from the grapevine, you have no input. Employees form opinions that influence their work behavior and productivity only from what they hear around the copy machine.
5. **Make at least a one-year commitment.** Leaders often give up on 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.
6. **Prepare to remain committed even when immediate results are discouraging.** At first, your direct reports might react to your communication efforts with skeptical silence. They do not ask questions, make comments, or provide any kind of feedback. This type of response is perfectly understandable in this Dilbert age. People often distrust the new and unfamiliar, particularly new efforts to communicate. Another possible reaction is griping. Employees seize this opportunity to unload on you. Your face-to-face communication effort might turn into an unpleasant gripe session. If communication has been minimal in the past, employees may have built up negative feelings that they give voice to at the first opportunity. Have faith that response will improve. Once people realize that you are serious about keeping them informed, listening to their ideas and are being as honest as possible, they will begin to focus on real issues. When they do, both morale and productivity will soar.
7. **Be redundant.** 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 new, unfamiliar, or from a new source. Efforts at communication often fail because leaders throw up their hands too soon. "I mentioned our falling profits to my people last month and no one paid any attention. Communicating is so much trouble and does no good if no one cares!" Be patient and persistent. Mention falling profits again.

8. **Provide plenty of opportunities for questions and feedback.** The goal is a small group discussion about the business. You must become comfortable with asking questions and silence in order to provide plenty of opportunities for your team members to make comments and ask their own questions. Your team can't talk if you monopolize the conversation. Learn to listen so that others will feel comfortable expressing their opinions and concerns.

The key to employee engagement and commitment is real dialogue and conversation. Communication is a challenge...it meet the challenge, take action now.

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Innolect's distinguished clients include Pfizer, Entergy, SonyBMG, She has been featured on ABC's 20/20 and in publications including: *American Medical News*, *Bottom-line Personal*, *Money*, *Glamour*, and *Home Office Computing*. Two of her most recent books are *Leadership Coaching: The Fast-Track to Effectiveness* and *21 Days to Smarter Listening*.