

Talk to (Really) be Heard

By Jo Smith

Do your internal communications get the results you want?

Poor communications result in wasted effort and missed opportunities at best and crises of misunderstanding at worst. The responsibility for improving communications begins not with the recipient, but with the sender, whether that's you as a leader, an individual contributor, or a manager training others to communicate effectively.

The potential benefits of improving communications include greater efficiency and effectiveness, as well as improved morale, engagement, loyalty and productivity. Better communications mean better results.



Understand Your Background

Today's workplace represents a rich and sometimes challenging tapestry of generational, gender, racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity that must be considered when planning and executing firm communications. Woven within this tapestry, are a multitude of differing personalities. DiSC, PREP, and various other personality profiles identify these differing styles and their corresponding communications preferences. For example, introverts tend to communicate only when they think they have something important to say, while extroverts communicate more frequently and fully. PREP's objective communicators want to address message content immediately, while personal communicators prefer a brief (or lengthy) personal opening before discussing the core of a message. Some personalities prefer big-picture communications, while others want to know "how the watch was made." Furthermore, if left unaware, each personality is likely to think that his or her communications style is "right" while others' preferences are "wrong." That's why it's critically important to understand the changing workplace and theories of personality when communicating to your firm, your team, and your colleagues.

Plan your Strategy

Know your management philosophy about information-sharing in advance. What and how much information do you need and want to share with whom? I recommend a high degree of transparency, but that is a decision that varies among firms and leaders. Whatever you and your firm decide, it's critical that you be strategic about your group communications, so you don't lose your impact to the white noise of communications overload.

Get the right information to the right people and match your message and modality to your information and audience as much as you practically can. Recurring information is most commonly and effectively delivered electronically, while the most important and personal information should be delivered in person.

Batch and distribute regular and recurring information so people receive only the information they want or need and don't receive what doesn't pertain to them. A help-

ful way to plan your recurring communications is to create a matrix, with types of information along the left side and other considerations, such as recipients, modality and frequency, across the top. The table below provides an abbreviated example of a matrix that can help you plan and batch your recurring group communications, making sure they get to the right people by the right method.

Better communications mean better results.

Communications Matrix

Information Type	Leadership	All Firm	All Atty.	All Staff	Modality	Frequency	Etc.
Financial Data							
New Client Updates							
Hires, Promotions etc.							
Marketing Updates							
Etc.							

You can alter and add categories to meet your needs. For example, you might divide financial data into several

categories, i.e. an annual in-person "state of the firm" meeting, monthly reports, weekly updates, etc. If you hire and promote infrequently, you might announce those changes as they occur, or you could expand the category to become a monthly "HR News" briefing that includes updates on notable accomplishments of firm members. A similar matrix can be developed by internal teams or practice groups, to track and report progress on one or more projects. However you complete and use it, a visual matrix can help you plan your recurring, group communications for best results.

Develop Your Message

In broad brushstrokes, communications in today's workplace should be short and clear, and grab attention with a title or introductory sentence that states the benefits or relevance to the reader,

ending with a request for action, if that is appropriate. More detailed information can be enclosed or attached for those who need or choose to read it.



Mind Tools™ identified 7 Cs of Communication: Clear, Concise, Concrete, Correct, Coherent, Complete and Courteous. A periodic review of these 7 Cs will help you prepare and deliver more effective written messages. You can find additional information and examples at <http://www.mindtools.com>.

The 7 Cs can also help you prepare for in-person communications. If you need to deliver a critical message, especially if you are a personal communicator or an introvert, it's important for you to plan in advance the key elements of the message. If you don't plan it, you might not say it clearly or fully enough to be heard and understood. Here are a few questions to ask yourself in advance of delivering an important message: What do I want my listener to know following our conversation? What do I want my listener to do as a result of our conversation? If action is required, when do I want that action to take place? How might my listener react? What more might he/she want to know?

Consider Your Audience

Are you communicating across functions or expertise? You undoubtedly use jargon when communicating with your cohort, but that same jargon can become an obstacle when you try to communicate outside your functional area. Furthermore, you're probably unaware of some of

the jargon and shorthand you regularly use. To my surprise, business people occasionally ask me, "What does HR mean?" Two ways to minimize jargon to improve understanding are 1) replace the jargon you're consciously aware of with simple, widely-understood language when speaking outside your group and 2) ask people to tell you if they don't understand a term you're

Match your message and modality to your information and audience.

using. You can further improve your communication across functions by checking in frequently to make sure your listener understands what you're saying. When you're discussing critical information, "Do you understand?" isn't sufficient. Ask questions that will require them to demonstrate their understanding. When possible, reinforce your communications with visuals. Stories and examples will further help to clarify and reinforce your message.

What about your listeners' personality? Is he or she an introvert or extrovert, a big-picture generalizer or detailed thinker, a personal or objective communicator? Be observant. You don't have to know DiSC or PREP results, to make an educated guess about someone you work with often. Choose a quiet, private place

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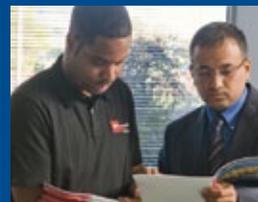
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to communicate with an introvert. You might need to draw additional information from an introvert or an objective communicator, whereas you might need to keep an extrovert or a personal communicator focused on the conversation at hand. If you're communicating with a big-picture thinker, start with the results, and then provide a high-level overview. Be prepared to deliver details only

7C's: Be Clear, Concise, Concrete, Correct, Coherent, Complete and Courteous

if they're necessary. What if you think the details are necessary, but your listener doesn't? You can provide the details in another format, to be read later as needed, or invite your listener to return to you for more details when they're needed. If, however, you're communicating with a detail-seeker, start with the details, take the time to talk through the analysis, and end with the results.

Matching your communications to the personality style of your listener(s) is not pandering, as you might think, or wasting time. It will help your listener (employee, colleague) absorb and process your communication more quickly and easily and make it more likely that he or she will respond with the results you want.

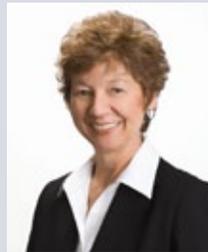
In the long term, matching styles requires less time and makes communications more efficient and effective.

Open Your Door

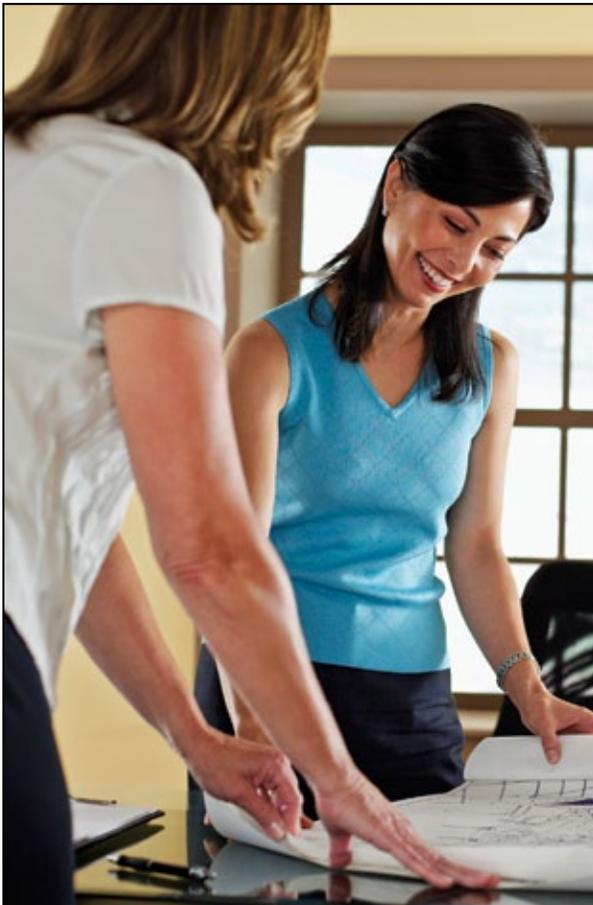
A message on workplace communications wouldn't be complete without a reminder to welcome colleagues and employees seeking information and advice. An accountant once told me shortly after he was promoted to a management position, "I can't get my job done now, because of all the people coming to my office." "Those people ARE your job now," I quickly pointed out to him. If you manage the work of other people, helping those people work to the best of their ability is one of your most important responsibilities. Perhaps it's your primary responsibility.

Whatever your job, your technical expertise will open the door. Your ability to relate and communicate will make the difference between success and mediocrity. Improve your communications to get the results and success you want.

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