

A failure to communicate

Paul Tuck discusses the role of talent, learning and OD in enabling effective workplace communication

Ever since we have been able to communicate there have been failures and misunderstandings. In the context of the workplace, these communication failures cause a variety of problems at both individual and business levels.

The talent, learning and OD function plays a key part in minimising the risk of failure in communication and maximising its effectiveness at work. In this article, I will explore the impact of communication failure and identify the steps needed to create an environment of communication excellence.

A failure to communicate!

At a corporate level the consequences of failing to communicate can be catastrophic. Here are some examples to illustrate what can happen if you fail to meet the standards of communication expected by customers, employees or shareholders.

Take the example of Nokia, which fell out of step with the market and struggled to turn its good ideas into products. This was caused partly by *“habits of communication that favour unfocused discussions about strategy over clear plans to bring new phone models to market”*. Enron’s collapse can point to *“communication-based leader responsibilities”* that senior managers failed to meet – responsibilities such as *“communicating appropriate values”* and *“maintaining openness to signs of problems”*. Among the key factors that contributed to the BP oil disaster were *“poor communications”* and a failure *“to share important information”*.

The recent worldwide Toyota recall was a major communications disaster for the firm because it *“forgot the need for transparency”*. The company

changed the story and ‘covered up’ the true problems, resulting in its image being significantly tarnished. Toyota Motors as a whole announced that it could face losses totalling as much as \$2bn from lost output and sales worldwide. Had it been transparent, the problem *“could have been resolved with far less negative press, without Congressional sanction, and without the decline in sales”*, according to Avi Hein².

What can we learn from such failures?

Pay attention to communication in the workplace

Communication is a strategic agenda topic, a central part of the culture of the organisation. It is important to communicate the vision and mission in a compelling way that sets out the purpose of the organisation clearly to create the context for the people who connect it.

The shared vision and values, including the choice of words, the message and the tone together create the blocks on which the organisation is built. Failure to communicate this effectively undermines the entire strategic effort and erodes trust in the top leadership.

References

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Leadership practices have a real-time impact on the way employees experience the quality of workplace communication

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Trust is a critical element that is hard to fake. It is the one thing that changes everything; it is common to every individual, team and relationship, and, if removed, can destroy even the most powerful organisation³. In high-trust organisations, information is shared openly and mistakes are tolerated as a means of learning.

Failures of communication erode and destroy trust. The challenge is to embed an authentic culture of communication in a way that reflects the values of the people in the organisation. If tuning into the values is critical to maintain trust, listening to what the stakeholders have to say becomes essential if the trust is to be maintained in a genuine two-way relationship.

Employee surveys are common tools for understanding the expectations of the workforce. Communication-related topics form seven out of the 12 actionable workplace elements with proven links to performance outcomes. They are key to achieving higher levels of employee engagement⁴:

- I know what is expected of me at work
- at work, my opinions seem to count
- there is someone at work who encourages my development
- the mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important
- in the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work
- my supervisor, or someone at work, seems to

care about me as a person

- in the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.

"Worldwide, only 13 per cent of employees are engaged at work"⁵

Survey responses provide a good data source for informing efforts to improve engagement levels. Look to additional 'proof points' to validate and enrich your understanding of the level and quality of communication in your organisation, such as development planning, performance reviews, leaver interviews, joiner interviews, customer feedback – ask yourself *how can I use this insight to increase the level of engagement in our organisation?*

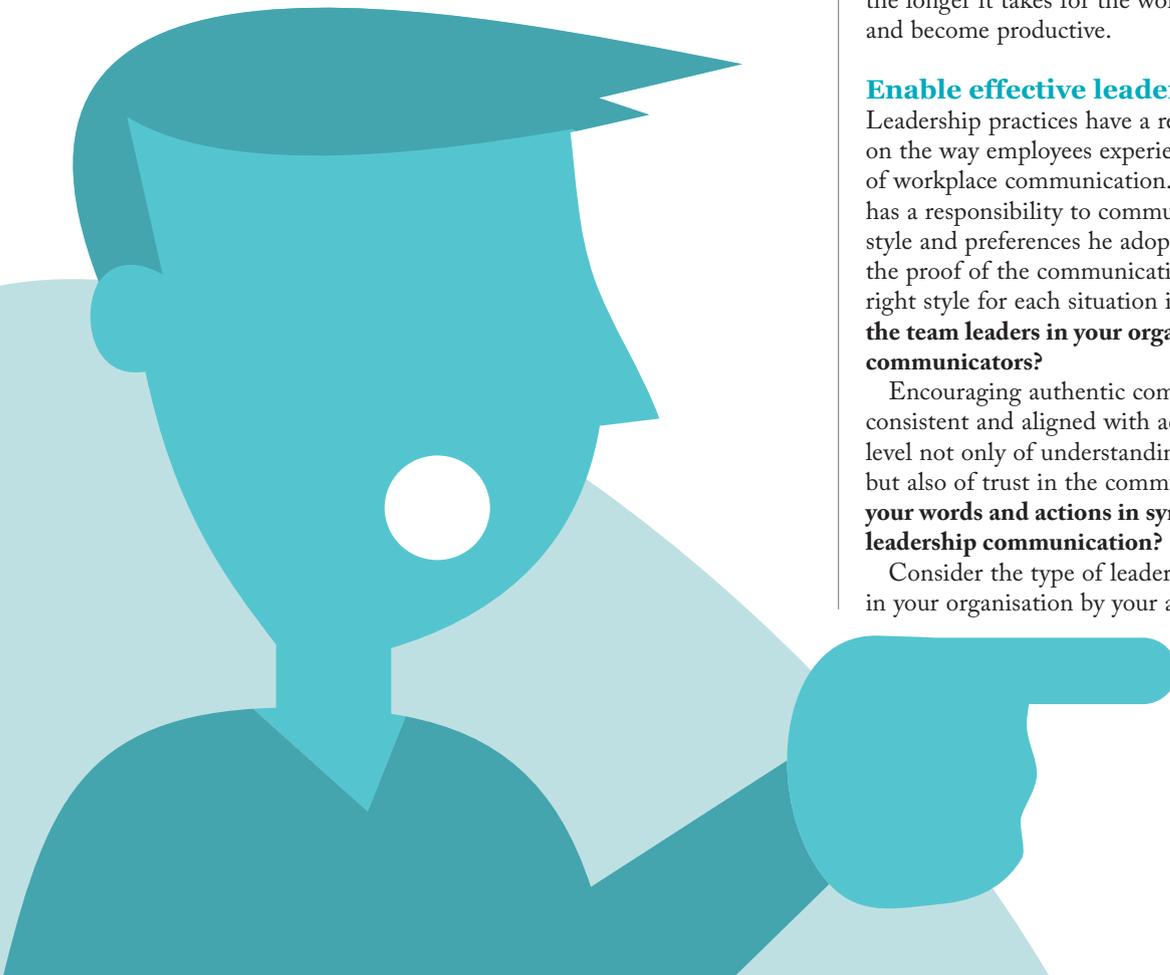
Lack of communication in a workplace can create conflict in relationships. The tension created in these working relationships can ultimately lead to low morale and poor operational results⁶, affecting productivity and performance. Common elements of poor or negative communication include rumours, misinformation, incomplete information and workplace conflict⁷. This can bring added stress to the workplace that makes it difficult to develop a productive work environment. When negative communication becomes habitual, it can lead to a drop in staff confidence in the company. The longer it is allowed to degrade the quality of communication and teamwork in the workplace, the longer it takes for the workplace to recover and become productive.

Enable effective leadership

Leadership practices have a real-time impact on the way employees experience the quality of workplace communication. The team leader has a responsibility to communicate but it is the style and preferences he adopts that provides the proof of the communication. Selecting the right style for each situation is essential. **Are all the team leaders in your organisation excellent communicators?**

Encouraging authentic communication that is consistent and aligned with actions increases the level not only of understanding of the message but also of trust in the communicator. **Are your words and actions in sync on the topic of leadership communication?**

Consider the type of leader profile you promote in your organisation by your actions or inaction:



Asking	< Communication focus >	Telling
Coaching style	< Leadership style >	Directive style
Stories and dialogue	< Communication method >	Issue instructions
Concern for people	< Focus of concern >	Concern for task

There are many tools to help identify leadership styles and the diligent use of a leadership 360° feedback tool goes a long way to providing answers to questions about the way leaders behave and the skills they use. The real work starts when you look at the information with the individual leader and use it to help him make the changes necessary to achieve the standard of excellence. Providing hands-on support at that point is invaluable and helps to ensure that the follow-up actions are relevant and effective.

Coaching is a 'resonant style' of leadership that involves the art of one-to-one communication and helping others to identify their true strengths and weaknesses⁸. Coaching leaders listen to workers' feelings and respond empathically and supportively is a crucial skill during chaotic times. In general they build positive work climates, while commanding and directive leaders are out of sync and out of touch, creating disharmony⁹. Encouraging a leader to adopt a coaching style, and supporting him in using it, will hone his active communication skills and make sure he remains alive to the need to 'ask' rather than 'tell'¹⁰.

Of course, each leader must develop his own 'natural' style that is authentic to him and his values. Encouraging such authentic behaviour, aligned to the individual's identity, helps to keep the relationship on a trust basis. He needs to ask others what they think and mean it by "listening from the heart, with curiosity and compassion", in order to be credible¹¹.

The leader's agenda should be full of communication activities that increase employees' engagement levels, such as acknowledging when work is done well, clarifying when work needs improvement and remaining open to hearing opinions or feedback.

Each leader is encouraged to 'walk the talk' and set the tone he wants others

Failures of communication erode and destroy trust

to follow. His own behaviour has a direct bearing on the outcomes he achieves. This role-modelling approach serves to reinforce the excellence in communication that you have set as the standard – it brings the standards to life, builds the culture and creates 'the right way of doing things' in which others can operate successfully. This virtuous circle is based on behaving in ways that people value themselves.

As individuals, people tend to adapt their behaviour to the prevailing culture. If that culture fosters communication and encourages a standard of excellence, while embracing failures as learning opportunities, the potential for a communication culture is high. The opposite is also true.

You need to systematically address the causes of communications in the organisation to reduce the risk of failures.

In an open communication environment, people can have the kind of difficult conversation that they might otherwise avoid, or handle poorly, and achieve the most effective outcomes. Knowing that it is okay to fail because there is a learning culture – one in which people can acknowledge what they do not know¹² – provides the necessary platform for mastering the skills needed to push the frontiers and excel.

5 Gallup State of the Global Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for Business Leaders Worldwide (2013)

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TLOD is perfectly placed to take the lead by creating the environment and setting the climate in which excellent communication thrives

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Examples of the causes of communication problems in organisations¹³:

- People are not aligned with mission and vision
- People are unclear on goals, accomplishments and timelines
- People don't always realise who their internal and external customers are, who they need to work with and who has the information or other resources they need
- People are undisciplined about when to communicate with others
- People don't know how to communicate appropriately with managers, staff, and others.

What is the role of training, learning and OD in workplace communication?

TLOD must step up and harness the power of workplace communication. Of course there are (mainly perceived) barriers that prevent it from taking up the challenge. "Sure," I hear you say, "but every individual has the responsibility to communicate effectively and we cannot do it for them!" That is true but TLOD is perfectly placed to take the lead by creating the environment and setting the climate in which excellent communication thrives.

Failure to do so can result in the whole function being perceived as a transactional, rather than strategic, contributor to the organisation. For example, focusing solely on providing training courses on the topic of communication is important and has a positive impact on individuals but is unlikely to create a meaningful impact on the organisation as a whole.

If failures in workplace communication provide the

opportunity for TLOD to take the lead, how are you making the most of that opportunity?

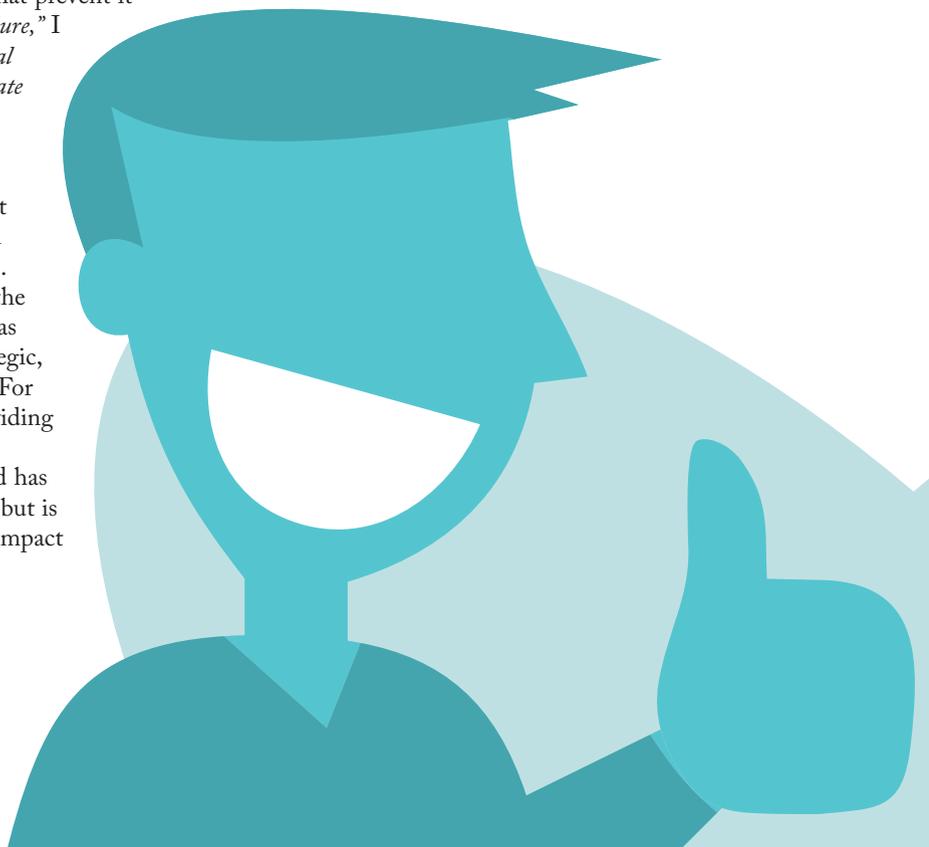
Take the lead – be strategic

Treat workplace communication as a strategic imperative and set out to measure your contribution to the return on investment of effective communication. Use the ROI achieved to demonstrate the value of TLOD. Make a systematic effort to take a leadership position on communication:

- take ownership of the communication topic and place it on the strategic agenda
- create the strategic framework as an enabler of excellent communication
- develop an open culture that values information sharing and collaboration
- foster trusting relationships that encourage candour
- promote leadership by example, such as asking, not telling and adopting a coaching style
- encourage engagement of employees and appreciation of personal values.

Set the tone around core values and the need for explicit communication standards – set the standard at excellence and undertake a thorough, consistent and persistent pursuit of that standard. Be sure to enforce the standards once they have been set.

Influence and direct the policy – refresh and upgrade existing communications policies and integrate them, along with the standards, into the



HR processes and line management practices such as:

- talent acquisition and on-boarding
- leader development
- performance review
- team development
- reward and recognition
- job design.

Model the way. Act as role models in the way you communicate and enlist 'champions' to act as ambassadors of communication excellence, such as members of the executive team, senior leaders, project sponsors and high potentials.

Enable key influencers by supporting them with communicating their key objectives.

Get tactical too

Don't stay at the 50,000-foot-up level. Follow up at a granular, detailed level. Embed the best practices into the services you provide, such as training, coaching, mentoring, toolkits and reference materials. Work to ensure that each person, case by case, is supported in their efforts to communicate at the highest standard.

Be active at each of the many 'touch points' for communication, such as meetings, one-to-one dialogue, feedback, negotiation, customer interactions and intranet messaging. Reinforce the message at every opportunity by emphasising what excellence in communication involves in situations such as performance appraisal meetings, briefings, team meetings, on-boarding discussions, giving and getting feedback or group presentations.

Create an accessible proposition that offers learning opportunities for leaders and employees. Pick from the vast array of available methods for developing skills.

Follow the learning into the workplace to help individuals and teams be more effective and reach the standard of excellence in a way that delivers better results. Measuring the outcomes in terms of impact on results demonstrates the value of the services that you provide and can reinforce the benefit to the organisation of getting communication right – particularly if you include a comparison with the consequences of failed communications!

As you strive for excellence, remember not to treat communication failures as the enemy, instead treat them as learning opportunities towards the excellence goal. Actively review instances of poor or failed communication and treat it as 'feed forward' that can be incorporated into improvement efforts.

Moving from the strategic to the tactical requires a seamless transition. There needs to be clear and obvious congruence between the policies and the practices. The strategic intent should be delivered by the operational practices and part of the TLOD role is to enable the transitions and ensure they actually work in the real world.

Summary

Workplace communication failure is a significant issue for organisations, with major consequences. It is also a learning opportunity in which talent, learning and OD should take a lead and play a key part in creating an environment of communication excellence by:

- driving the strategic agenda and framing the issue for the organisation
- setting the standards and helping to enforce them
- modelling the way in communication and how to learn from failure
- getting tactical with hands-on support through the practical delivery of services.

Achieving excellence in workplace communication requires a consistent and persistent drive towards the highest and the desire to treat failures to communicate as an opportunity.

So, one last question: **are you failing to communicate the importance to the organisation of excellence in workplace communication?** **TJ**

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