



## Workplace Communication Problems: Inquiries by Employees and Applicable Solutions

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### Abstract

*Communication is the lifeblood of an organization and, without it, things will not get done. But, we know organizations and employees may lack the ability to learn, use, and exploit good communication practices. This article looks at some organizational communication questions and problems that appeared in a Minnesota newspaper column, “Ask Dave” over the last four years and provides applicable, thoughtful solutions that will enhance business communications instruction and learning.*

**Keywords:** Communication, Workplace, Problems, Solutions

### Introduction

Without workplace communication, nothing would be accomplished. Instructions could not be given; equipment and supplies could not be ordered; progress could not be measured; and products and services could not be delivered to customers. According to Drucker (1954,) the five functions of management – planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling – are all dependent on communication. In fact, in surveys of highly successful managers across the nation, the ability to communicate effectively was identified as the most important skill a manager needs for success. However, studies show that many employees believe their managers are lousy communicators and managers feel the same way about the employees. Why would anything so fundamental, so learnable, and so crucial be something we struggle with so much? For one thing, there are those managers whose verbal instructions sound like something from a Gestapo general and whose memos sound like the ironclad laws of a tyrant. While these messages may be understandable, precise and clear, they are not well received, not embraced, by employees. Asking and telling an employee to do something will produce the same result, but asking will not produce the resentment that telling does. Employees like to be treated with respect and dignity, and, if a manager sets the tone and content of communications to do this, it will help develop a more productive and supportive workforce. As I have learned over the years: communicate respect and it will be returned. Short and simple!

We know the organizational “grapevine” is one of the most common – and often the most reliable – forms of communication found at work. People talk and they love to talk. When employees know that the manager is giving valid information, is not withholding information,

and is available to listen, there is no need for employees to go elsewhere to get information. Thus, the grapevine will flourish, but the facts will also be available. Clutterbuck (2000) states that, the smooth functioning of a workplace is dependent on cooperation between coworkers and, in order to cooperate well, coworkers need to be able to communicate effectively. Good communication must also exist within and between the team as a whole and the rest of the company. On another level, when employees clash, your bottom line suffers. Your office productivity decreases along with morale, while employee stress levels increase along with sick days. By identifying barriers to effective communication, you can make changes that create a calmer, more welcoming workplace - cultural, physical, emotional, and personality barriers might be some factors impacting office communication. Jablin and Putnam (2001) report that, listening is just as important as speaking, when it comes to communication. The manager who is a good listener is more likely to have employees who help identify and solve work-related problems. The reason is not surprising. Just as we like to have our boss hear and respect our ideas, our employees want us to hear and respect their ideas. Accordingly, organizational leaders must teach and hone the art and science of listening to enhance organizational communications. Whenever I see or hear about organizational problems that are caused by communications problems and issues, I am reminded of the famous line from the movie, "Cool Hand Luke," "What we have here is a failure to communicate." Investigating communication problems, Pratkanis and Aronson (1991), Mckenna (1985), and Pfeffer (1992) found that the best organizations communicate well, but also invent flowing communication systems that provide organizational members an opportunity to express and marshal their ideas, needs, and concerns.

I firmly believe that bad communication practices cause a majority of our work problems, not to mention the problems we face at home, or in our personal interactions with others outside of the workplace. Simply, we either pass along the wrong information, or we just fail to pass along valuable and correct information. Relationships thrive on communication. We know that communication has matured and morphed over a relatively short period, changing from typical face-to-face dialogue to the use of innovative and sophisticated technology designed to increase efficiency and effectiveness. We now use technology such as email, text-messaging, social media, and video teleconferencing communication, which has made it easier to communicate, but has become much less personal, and consequently misunderstood. I believe we have traded effectiveness for efficiency. We are people and we love to talk and, for a group of people to be an organization,, rather than just a random collection of individuals, they need to communicate with each other, understand what each other is doing, and coordinate their activities. As Covey (1990) indicates, you don't need to be a management expert to know that, the more effective the communication, the more efficient and productive the people and their activities will be. In addition, a well-organized workplace features openness and transparency throughout the levels of the company so that everyone is clear about his role and purpose at work and how it affects the work of others. Good leaders know that, providing a culture of openness and interpersonal relationships will create an environment and culture of trust and the ability to shed dysfunction and the likelihood of people misunderstanding each other, thus providing a true ability to communicate amongst others at every level of the organization. However, communications do not always function like a fine Swiss watch - all communication is complex and multidimensional with plenty of room for conflict and misunderstandings. Boone and Kurtz (2002) believe that, for an organization to be successful, it must have all employees capable of sending and receiving information quickly, clearly, effectively, and accurately. Mistakes caused

by miscommunication creates damage that may cause good customers and key employees to say, adios.

As I always say, leaders are responsible for communication to flow upward, downward, and across the organization. The “grapevine” does a fairly good job of passing information and stories, but leaders must assess if what is being traded is accurate and if the truth is being spread around. As Certo (2000) reports, seasoned leaders understand that their jobs are much simpler when they hear and have access to a constant flow of information from their employees, as well as all stakeholders of the company - both positive and negative feedback, as well as ideas, observations, and problems should be sought out from every person in every corner of the organization. And, soliciting feedback from workers also improves staff morale by showing that management takes their opinions seriously and wants to include them in the ongoing improvement of the organization. Communication is the lifeblood of an organization and, without it, things will not get done. But, we know organizations may lack the ability to learn, use, and exploit good communication practices. Let’s take a look at some organizational communication questions and problems that appeared in my newspaper column, “Ask Dave” over the last four years and you can determine if my advice is sage and applicable.

### **“Persuasion Can Be Learned”**

**Dear Dave,**

**I am always so impressed when I hear persuasive people speak. It seems like some people just have a gift of persuasiveness. Can anyone become more persuasive? If so, how can I learn to be more persuasive?**

**S**

**Dear S,**

Yes, persuasion skills can be learned. I hope I can persuade you of that fact. And, yes, some people appear to have that magical gift of persuasion, but, trust me, they have worked hard at developing the ability to persuade others.

As you have observed, being able to influence and persuade others to get them to do what you want them to do is a key skill not only in business, but in life as a whole. As Lussier and Achua (2001) indicate, we only achieve real results through others and that takes effective and persuasive communication skills.

### **Persuasion Defined**

Persuasion is influence and involves getting people to accept your arguments and/or point of view in a way that meets their needs. Others are motivated to accept your view, because they understand and agree, without sensing coercion or intimidation, or feeling they have been deceitfully manipulated. According to most communication experts, persuasion can be defined as a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere

of free choice. Whew! That is a mouthful. My management colleagues tell me persuasion is simply, building rapport with individuals; finding out exactly what they need; telling them how you will deliver solutions to their need(s); and then doing it. People become fully convinced when they believe that what is proposed is valuable to them and they have an opportunity to get it.

## **Learning The Art of Persuasion**

Persuasion is mastery of several different traits. You need to be confident (not arrogant and brash), focused and self-assured (and not sound like a bumbling idiot), and be appealing and engaging (and not come off like a con artist). People want to hear rational, truthful, and credible messages from honest, sincere, and trustworthy people. If you are dealing with people who are only inspired by facts and rational arguments, using straightforward logic is the best approach. However, convincing people through logic isn't the easiest thing and will require you to do a lot of research to be thoroughly prepared to present your case. Also, emotional people – those hyper individuals who are all over the place when you talk to them – can calm down and focus on your message if you are calm and can support your discussion with credible and logical evidence.

Here are three key ingredients in presenting a persuasive message:

**Know your facts** - Be able to document any claims you make with factual data and information as proof. You've researched the evidence, so tell others what it says. But, don't come off as a "know-it-all."

**Know your audience** - What kinds of people are they? What is their current opinion on the issue or topic? How did they form their opinion? Where do they get their information? What are their own needs and interests? What arguments are most likely to persuade them?

**Know how to fit the facts to your audience** – Once you have your claims backed up by proof, and you know the interests and motivations of your listeners, carefully match what you have to say to what they want and need to hear.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice! The more you use rational persuasion principles the more influential you will become.

### **“Managers Must Talk to Their Employees”**

**Dear Dave,**

**Why do some managers not interact with their employees? Where I work, it seems like our managers tell us next to nothing about what is going on with the company. They don't even ask us how we are doing, or if we need anything. You always write about the need for managers to talk to employees. Can you please write something about this again?**

**R**

**Dear R,**

Yes, organizations thrive on communication and dialogue. It is crucial that managers simply interact with employees, ask them questions about what is going on, and inquire into how they can help the employees in any way. In addition, managers should pass along information about the company that will help employees understand the mission, vision, goals, and objectives pertaining to where the company is heading and what may lie ahead. Some of my management colleagues may not agree with me about the need to tell employees about the strategy and direction of the company, because they think it may confuse, overwhelm, or scare them, but I believe this organizational knowledge helps employees sense a “we-ness” in purpose and commitment, and inspires them to work toward shared goals.

### **Management by Walking Around (MBWA)**

If managers isolate themselves, their team may not learn from their experience, and this can undermine problem solving and decision making. Being connected can be a major factor for success - the more connected managers are, the better they can understand what motivates members of their team, analyze what's really going on, and find solutions that meet the needs of their people and their company. As Peters and Waterman (1982) have long stated, when managers mingle and talk to employees – without smothering and pouncing on their staff – it shows that they care about what the employees are thinking and doing. Also, this “Walking Around” provides opportunities for employees to ask crucial questions, or report errors and problems. To get connected and stay connected, managers need to take time during their busy day, walk around and talk to their team, work alongside them, ask questions, and be there to help when needed. When staff sees their manager as a person and not just a boss, they'll be more likely to tell them what's going on. Managers will get the chance to learn about issues before they become problems. Also, as the manager's team gets to know them better, they'll trust them more. They will be naturally inclined to share more information, and that will break down barriers to communication.

### **Talk Straight and Fast**

Here's how managers can use conversation to help manage more effectively:

1. Talk straight - Be explicit, honest and authentic, especially when it comes to sharing bad news or addressing difficult topics.
2. Make talk happen - Stressful and challenging times can cause people to keep to themselves. Promote interactivity and encourage dialogue. Use less one-way communication channels (like e-mails) and choose mediums that allow for back-and-forth discussion instead.
3. Let everyone talk - Include people at all levels in the conversation. This will increase engagement among those who must carry out the most crucial every-day work.
4. Finally, do not shoot messengers - People will stop coming to management with important news, ideas, and input, if they fear they will be chastised for being some kind of trouble maker.

In summary, people are people, and they want to be talked to and treated like individuals that matter. When managers interact with their people every day, they learn a great deal more than sitting in their office with the door closed.

### **“Perceptions May Not Be Reality”**

**Dear Dave,**

**We tried something in our department that I was not in favor of: Employees were given the opportunity to provide anonymous feedback about their managers and more or less criticize any shortcomings of their managers. It really was not an opportunity to explain what the managers do right, but rather, to detail what we don't do well. I was quite shocked and disappointed by what was said about me. I know there are a lot of bad managers, but I thought I was different and was viewed by my people as someone they could count on. The biggest problem they saw was their inability to approach me and give me information, or discuss problems. I am trying to stay constructive, so what do I need to do to change these perceptions and ensure I am approachable and open?**

**J**

**Dear J,**

There is much you can do. First, let me say that the opportunity for employees to anonymously provide feedback about their manager can be a very positive experience, if, in fact, the feedback is not a character or personality assassination and, rather, constructive views that can be turned into changes a manager may choose to make. As Schumann (2003) recommends, it is very important for managers to maintain a positive, productive relationship with their employees, and one of the most important things to strive for is to remain open and approachable. Far too many employers maintain an intimidating air of “do not disturb” that often leads to employee resentment, an intimidating work culture, and problems that could have been nipped in the bud early on.

**Don't kill the messenger** – Nothing will destroy approachability faster than people feeling victimized – even chastised – for coming forth with information. If you present yourself as a boss who only wants to hear good news, you run the risk of being unapproachable when there is vital – often negative – information you need to hear. Let your staff know that they can come to you with potential problems or suggestions...and mean it. Show them you recognize that since they're the ones closest to the day-to-day work, they may have a better insight into what is really going on.

**Open your door and just talk to your people** - Simply, being available and inviting is the key to getting employees to open up. You don't need to engage in deeply personal interactions to create an environment where workers feel you take an interest in them beyond the work they do. Sincerely, ask them how things are going and what can be improved to help them be more effective. This should be conversational, not hard-core and intimidating.

**Study others who appear to be quite approachable** - Who seems best at listening to team and individual opinions? Who in the company appears to be “in the know” and has systems or activities in place for hearing employee feedback and suggestions? Look at what they do, even ask for their help.

**Other “approachability” tips:**

1. **Set aside some time each day to communicate with your employees** -You could possibly set up “open for information office hours.”
2. **Ask your employees open-ended questions** – Ask questions such as, “How can I support you better?” or “What information do you need from me to become more successful at your job?”
3. **Show concern about your employee’s personal and professional success and well-being** - If you truly care about your employee’s success, you will find the time to support them and this will be obvious and welcomed.
4. **Take time to give positive feedback daily** – People love positive recognition. The more positive feedback you give, and the more frequent the feedback, the more motivated your employees will feel.
5. **Check your nonverbal communication** – Assess your nonverbal actions. Always being in a rush, scowling when people talk to you, or sitting in your office with the door closed, sends out signals that you do not want to communicate with your staff.

When employees perceive a manager as unavailable or unapproachable, they tend to cover up problems. It takes the unapproachable manager longer to find out what their problems are. Also, remember, if your customers and suppliers find you extremely approachable, you will learn valuable things that can enhance or even save your business.

**“Are Teleconferences as Effective as Face-to-Face Meetings”**

**Dear Dave:**

**My company is cutting costs and is limiting travel to a great extent. The company believes there are ways to work smarter and employees can do more meetings and presentations by Internet or teleconference. Maybe I am old school, but is there a chance that spending less time face-to-face with people going to hurt you in the long-term? I know I get so much more accomplished when I sit down at a table with people than I do by phone or e-mail. What is your opinion?**

**P**

**Dear P,**

If you are old school, I may have been a classmate of yours. I use electronic communications like most these days, but I also believe that not being in front of people will eventually break down solid relationships, or diminish the quality of optimal discussion and dialogue. There is a lot to be said for a solid handshake and the warmth of a smile.

We live in a marvelous age where electronic communications is getting better and better. Video conferencing is huge as is telecommuting. People are linking up at any time of the day and are reducing the costs and time associated with travel. I think the answer is to create a balance of electronic communications and face-to-face visits. You need to determine how you can add electronic communications to your normal communication practices without losing effectiveness or deteriorating relationships. Research what some outstanding companies are doing to balance live meetings with electronic communications. Ask you customers, suppliers, and employees what they would like to see. But, don't forget, people are people and like human contact. If you were to err on the use of either too much electronic or face-to-face meetings, I would choose the latter.

### **“Those Who Share Knowledge and Information Hold the Power”**

**Dear Dave,**

**At my company everyone is nervous about their jobs and this causes people to share very little with each other. I think they believe that sharing knowledge and information will make them weaker because others will become stronger. Even small tasks get messed up, because basic communication did not take place. Please share your thoughts.**

**P**

**Dear P,**

You hit it on the head: your fellow employees view knowledge as power and giving it away decreases their power. This information hoarding is unproductive and dangerous.

Most management experts, including Ober (2001), would say that knowledge sharing makes the company tick. Many mistakes and errors can be avoided if folks are ‘in the know’ about things that others may know. Knowledge hoarding also decreases your organization’s ability to improve its capabilities and competencies making it less competitive.

Unfortunately, people sometimes attempt to amass power by keeping information to themselves. In every-day business, however, the opposite approach is the most effective. Sharing information is a source of power — the power to successfully complete work demands.

### **Learning Organizations**

Your company must become a Learning Organization. Management theorist, Peter Senge (1990) defines the Learning Organization as the organization "in which you cannot *not* learn because learning is so insinuated into the fabric of life." Also, he defines Learning Organization as "a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create." This requires sharing information versus the way too common practice of ‘hoarding information’. I would define the Learning Organization as an organization with an ingrained philosophy for anticipating, reacting, and responding to change, complexity and uncertainty.



This means people need to talk to each other, learn from and teach each other, and just routinely tell others what they should know.

### **Power from Sharing Knowledge**

The old, paradigm is protecting and certainly not sharing information. As you put it, people are stuck in the mindset that knowledge is power and they only share what they know when forced. The new paradigm is that those within the organization who unselfishly teach, share information, and proactively look for new and better ways to enhance the knowledge base of others are the ones who will rise within the organization. This is a shift in thinking and will cause many to panic and resist. As one of my Rochester colleagues explains, the only people who fail to share helpful, valuable information and especially innovative ideas are the ones who feel they will never be able to come up with new ones.

### **Management is Responsible**

Management theorists argue that the leader's role in the Learning Organization is that of a designer, teacher, and steward who can build shared vision and challenge prevailing mental models. He/she is responsible for building organizations where people are continually expanding their capabilities to shape their future -- that is, leaders are responsible for learning. Good management practices encourage, recognize, and reward: openness, knowledge sharing, creativity, discussion, and information passage. The saying, “companies depend on communication” is not just a mission statement credo – it must be lived and reinforced. Good communication is critical if you want the people in your company to all pull in the same direction — toward success. Sharing information isn't enough. Managers should ensure that each and every employee provides others with the information that they need (not too little, not too much) when they need it

### **“Communication Skills Education is a Priority”**

**Dear Dave,**

**Why do many people communicate so poorly these days? It's not just when they write, but half the time I can't understand what people are saying. Maybe it's me, but are people learning how to communicate in schools or at their work? Will it get worse?**

**Kathy**

**Dear Kathy,**

You came to the right person. The preponderance of poor communications skills is systemic in nature considering poor high school graduation rates. The U.S. Census Bureau reported the 2007 Minnesota public high school graduation rate was only 59 percent.

So, what should we be “learnin’”? Sorry, bad joke. Communication writers such as Roebuck (2001) generally break business communication skills into three subsets: organizational, leadership, and interpersonal communication skills.

**Organizational communication skills** – these include: making convincing presentations, using information technology, writing business correspondence, initiating open discussion, negotiating, and resolving conflict.

**Leadership communication skills** – including: arousing enthusiasm, being a change catalyst, building team bonds, providing motivation, persuasion, and building optimism.

**Interpersonal communication skills** - the one-on-one skills including: active listening, building rapport, emotional self-control, building trust, and relating to people of diverse backgrounds

The question becomes: How can people learn and use these various skills? One word: Education. Colleges, high schools, community education, books (yup, reading more), trainers, and businesses may be of great help. The resources are out there - people must locate and learn from them. There's that personal accountability thing again. Can we blame *misuse* of electronic communications (e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) for causing the well-written word to become a confluence of abbreviations, poor grammar, incomplete sentences, and fragmented thoughts (work with me, I am venting here)? The answer is, yes. Can we blame sloppy, incoherent conversation and dialogue on bad habits, laziness, and incomplete education? Again, yes. Other teachers tell me many students lack basic communication skills and it is very difficult to teach a specific course that assumes students have basic communication skills, and they do not. Will it get worse? Yes, if we don't break the chain of communication decline. I believe education, business, and – yes, families - need to focus more attention on communication skills. Individuals must assess their communication skill competency and responsibly make attempts to improve. What good is knowledge and having viewpoints if you cannot communicate effectively?

### **“Communicating Bad News is Tough”**

**Dear Dave,**

**How should I communicate bad news? As a fairly new manager, I have been given the task nobody wants: Telling people about company problems and how we are going to do things such as layoffs, cost-cutting, and even taking away benefits. Maybe there is no good way to give bad news. Should I just announce the news and then get ready to run before people start asking questions?**

**Bob**

**Dear Bob,**

No one likes to get bad news, especially when it applies to one's livelihood. There is no doubt--layoffs are difficult to accept. However, there are communication formats that can lessen the pain.

I am not saying you can make something as devastating as layoffs sound like a Sunday church picnic, but treating people with respect and showing great empathy will certainly help. People often look at their work as who they are, even though there is much more to someone's life, such as family, friends, interests, faith, and health.

Using termination as an example, the message needs to be clear and concise. "Beating around the bush" isn't acceptable - neither is a very brief, dramatic statement like "You're fired." I can just imagine a manager discussing some exciting parts of their weekend with an employee and then saying, "Oh, by the way, pack up your crap, you're outa here!" A manager I know believes most employees have similar expectations about how they want bad news communicated to them. He says, "They want the process to be transparent and the option to be involved in the change process. This is why it's important for managers to communicate business concerns to their employees when they arise. When employees are aware and have had time to digest the situation, they are more apt to understand and accept difficult decisions." The following process, recommended by organizational psychologist, David G. Javitch, has been called the "bad news sandwich" because it starts positive, delivers the bad news, and ends with a positive. Even as a sandwich, it is *hard to swallow* (typical bad pun by Dave).

1. Say something positive, like "You've been a valuable member of our team for some time. I want you to know that I appreciate your contribution." This statement can be better accepted if you are certain to show empathy for the employee.
2. Continue with the bad news. Tell them you have to cut your losses and terminate some people or cut back on certain projects. Pause and wait for your words to "sink in."
3. State what you'll do to help out those being terminated. Say you have a program to show employees how to develop their resumes, search for new jobs, etc. If you don't intend to do this, then ask them to finish up what they're doing, gather their things, say their goodbyes, and leave the building by a certain time.

Show respect and concern for the employee when openly and honestly delivering news, even when that news is bad.

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