

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY:

BY HOWARD M. GUTTMAN

The modern organization is a complex, fast-moving, highly diverse entity, driven by the top and bottom lines.

These characteristics make effective communication up, down, across, and outside the organization a tricky business. The way an organization is constituted—its structure, culture, and processes—affects how well it delivers messages to all its stakeholders. Although many executives would deny it, even today most companies are run as top-down hierarchies. Since content tends to follow context, communication patterns follow suit.

Take, for example, companies in the healthcare sector. As Stephanie Neuvirth, chief human resources and diversity officer at California-based City of Hope, can testify, such companies traditionally have been run hierarchically, to the detriment of transparency and open dialogue. “In the hierarchical approach, communication is very guarded and characterized by just-in-time responses. If you ask, you’ll get information, but it’s not offered up voluntarily. Senior leaders were informing others rather than discussing issues at meetings. Oftentimes the real discussions and conversations were being held outside the meeting room,” she says.

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Stephanie Neuvirth, City of Hope



As in the broader organization, everyone within Neuvirth’s HR function was very polite, but tough issues tended to be avoided.

Meaningful feedback was rare; little discussion took place; no ground rules for response time were set; and at major presentations, people did not ask questions, even for clarity, for fear of being seen as unsupportive.

But times—and organizations—are changing. Think about the factors currently impacting organizations: collaboration, empowerment, innovation, technology, asynchronous work patterns, team proliferation, nimbleness, speed, and cutthroat global competition. We’ve barely scratched the surface, yet you can understand why sheer necessity is causing the old top-down, hierarchical order to crumble and a new high-performing, horizontal model to rise. The latter is a superior way to tap into the collective wisdom of an organization at every level, distribute decision making, work in teams, speed up issue resolution, and communicate transparently across functions and business units.

TEAM ALIGNMENT AND COMMUNICATION

When Bob Gamgort became CEO of Pinnacle Foods, which owns iconic brands such as Birds Eye, Duncan Hines, and Log Cabin, he immediately set out to create a high-performing,

Lessons from High-Performing Organizations

horizontal organization. After getting the lay of the land through intensive one-on-one interviews with his direct reports, he decided to begin by changing the dynamic of his top team. “If you want to start seeing high-performance behaviors,” Gamgort comments, “the team needs to go through an alignment, so we held one in the first couple of months.”

The alignment process is a way for teams to take a tough, introspective look at how they behave and perform and then begin to operate as high-performing, horizontal entities. To make this transition, they must gain agreement and commitment in five key areas: strategy, business deliverables, roles and responsibilities, protocols for decision making and communication, and business relationships. Hard-edged business results aside, the process promotes accountability beyond the success of individual functions and opens up communication across the organization. These changes lead to a different way of communicating. As Gamgort says, “You must immediately start finding ways to live your words. If someone is speaking and another person is rolling his eyes, you have to say, ‘Clearly, you don’t agree; this is the environment in which you need to talk about it.’”

At Pinnacle Foods, the alignment process went beyond the senior-leadership team members to include their direct reports, a group of about 50 executives. The process led to greater candor in communication between levels. As Pinnacle’s Regina Lind, senior director of organization development and talent management, points out, that candor boiled down to three core elements: attack issues and respect the person; speak up because it’s important to get all points of view on an issue; and proactively deliver good and bad news. Now communication is more fluid and honest, without the usual noise. “We’ve learned to talk about the importance of identifying issues—good and bad,” comments Lind, “and to do so early and often, bringing things to light with no repercussions or negative consequences for bad news.”



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PROTOCOLS FOR COMMUNICATING

One of the distinguishing features of communication in a high-performance, horizontal environment is an adherence to ground rules, or protocols, that guide decision making and communication. One common protocol in high-performing environments deals with the

deadly issue of triangulation, in which people take an issue to a third-party “rescuer” for resolution. It’s a misguided attempt to avoid responsibility by using a surrogate.

Consider Henkels & McCoy, a billion-dollar builder of infrastructure for utility companies and large pipelines for oil and gas companies. The company is a family-owned enterprise, an

environment that is rife with triangulation possibilities. As T. Roderick Henkels, president and CEO, observes, “Triangulation is a way of communicating in a family: There’s a problem with a brother or sister? No problem, talk to Mom. If you don’t like the answer, go to Dad.”

To prevent the divisiveness that triangulation can cause, Henkels and his team have outlawed the practice and put in place a protocol to prevent it. He says, “When someone comes to

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Emails and other forms of electronic communication, with their impersonal nature and proclivity for hurry-up responses, are fertile soil for miscommunication and conflict. City of Hope’s Neuvirth and her HR team have put in place a number of protocols to neutralize this effect. For example, email subject lines must convey the intent of the message: “Urgent,” “Action Required,” or “Information Only.” Responses are expected only from those to whom the message was sent and not from those who were just cc’ed. If an issue isn’t resolved after three email exchanges, it’s time to use old-fashioned modes, such as the telephone or a face-to-face meeting. These and other non-email protocols have helped to avoid email wars.

Within organizations, team meetings are ground zero for communication miscues. Prior to going through the alignment process for her HR team, Neuvirth owned team meetings. She set the agenda and provided updates on projects. Then, team members chimed in. There was not much back-and-forth dialogue. Now the leader-centric dynamic is flipped. Says Neuvirth, “We cocreate a list of topics and issues, and the person who owns the topic goes first to provide an update. I then build on what was shared. We all own the meeting and the outcomes.”

In the alignment sessions at Pinnacle Foods, the senior- and executive-leadership teams came to grips with team communication issues by agreeing to a number of meeting protocols. One of these protocols is, “*This is the meeting.*” As Lind explains, “We want whatever has to come out to come out *in the meeting* and not offline.” Other protocols that have made team communication more transparent and interactive: “Relevancy challenges are welcomed” and “We all own this outcome.” These are not just empty slogans. They are rigorously managed in an attempt to create a peer-to-peer communication environment in which senior team members feel they are leading, as Lind puts it, “with their direct reports and not for them.”

COMMUNICATING AND CAPABILITIES

Working and communicating within a high-performing, horizontal environment is somewhat counterintuitive, given the focus on candor, transparency, and confronting issues and the sense of accountability that cuts across silos and extends upward to being accountable for the success of leaders and the enterprise. In addition to participating in the alignment process, people must learn to communicate effectively in such an environment by mastering a new set of skills.

These skills include influencing, listening actively, and managing conflict. Prior to acquiring these skills, Henkels admits that he himself often was a roadblock to effective communication. “I have learned to avoid asking leading questions, to depersonalize, and not to edit what someone is saying but instead to first try to understand the other person,” he says.

The stories we tell ourselves can be the silent saboteurs of effective communication. Because stories are based on a person’s past experiences, they color his or her perception and create expectations that often are not valid. Lind notes that in a previous organization in which she worked, several executives held a story about the negative consequences for anyone who dared to voice a contrary point of view.

“Story busting,” as Neuvirth suggests, “is a very powerful skill to acquire. It begins with asking pointed questions: What evidence do you have? What’s causing you to believe that? What’s making you feel that way?” She concludes, “We have frequently found that it’s someone’s upbringing or prior work experience, rather than City of Hope’s culture, that’s the cause.”

10 FEATURES OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE COMMUNICATION

Is there a pattern of high-performance communication that distinguishes high-performance teams and organizations from others? Based on our experience, here are 10 elements that comprise a consistent pattern of high-performance communication:



1. Clarity. High-performing players demand clarity. They closely question one another when an issue is up for discussion. “Can you clarify that?” “What do you mean by such and such?” “Can you give us an example?” “What do you see as the consequences?” You hear these and other clarifying questions—and plenty of them.

2. Authenticity. High-performance language sidesteps game playing. You rarely hear team members asking “imposter questions”—those designed to poke holes for the sake of exposing a colleague’s Achilles heel—or making nonrelevant statements just to hear their own voices. High-performance discussion is straight talk. If there is a concern or disagreement, it’s put on the table, not hidden under it.

3. Accuracy. On a high-performance team, conversation is biased toward facts, data, and observable behavior. Team members often say “it’s my opinion that...” to signify to listeners that they are about to enter a no-fact zone. Colleagues solicit factual backup by asking, “On what do you base your judgment?” If a problem is being discussed, the first order of business is to get the facts. What, specifically, is the problem? Where and when is it occurring? Who and how much is involved?

4. Efficiency. There’s little attempt to beat around the bush and engage in verbal foreplay among high performers. In lieu of long preambles, they’re apt to say, “John, I have a concern about your behavior, and we need to talk.” The conversation is not about making excuses, but rather about accepting responsibility and moving on to solutions.

5. Completeness. You’re not likely to hear half the story in high-performance environments. What you’ll likely hear instead is, “Let’s discuss the pros and cons of the decision” or “Here are the risks with my proposal, and here’s what we stand to gain.” The aim is to inform, not to finesse.

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6. Timeliness. There’s a just-in-time feature to high-performing conversations. “Let’s put the facts—all of them—on the table, now.” A favorite question in these environments is, “By when?” There’s also plenty of “If...then” language, often related to the siloless high-performance environment. For example: “If Marketing executes its plan by June, then Sales will have plenty of time to generate business.”

7. Focus. On high-performing teams, conversation is typically strictly business, driven by the outcome required in a given situation. If the discussion involves setting priorities for a laundry list of issues, you don’t hear anyone jumping into solution mode. If the conversation is focused on identifying the root causes of a problem, you’re not likely to hear much about taking action to correct the causes. One CEO proudly has asserted that on his team, “Insult is the language of affection.” But more often, insult is the source of affliction, which is why it’s not part of the style of high-performance conversations.

8. Openness. High-performance conversations “go there.” If a team member—or the leader—is underperforming or if a function is problematic, colleagues on the team will address it openly. Elephant heads—those touchy issues that most teams pretend don’t exist—are an endangered species on high-performing teams.

9. Action orientation. Listen in on a high-performing team at decision time: “What are the key objectives?” “Who are the fewest people that need to be involved?” “By when should the entire team review the decision?” The words connote action. They also typically convey immediacy, such as when teams talk about the “24-hour rule.” This rule means a person must get back to a colleague with a response, if not a conclusion, within one business day.

10. Depersonalization. True, high-performing teams “go there,” but they don’t “go personal.” Nor do you hear much defensiveness. Rather, you frequently hear high-performing team members reminding one another in the face of criticism that “it’s a ‘business case.’” The point is to have the discussion objectively. MW

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