COMMUNICATING FOR ENGAGEMENT
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By now, it has become common knowledge among HR executives and the employees within their respective firms that the nature of internal communication within the organization can have a dramatic, if not revolutionary, impact on the conduct of business. From the time it takes to make a business decision to the level of stability within the organization, highly effective internal communication has the potential to affect virtually every type of HR outcome within a company with an eventual positive impact on the a company's bottom-line financial performance (Yates, 2006).

For better or worse, this has become increasingly salient as the forces of globalization further increase the volatility and dynamism of the markets in which today's companies find themselves competing. In order to effectively respond to market changes that can, and often do, occur without warning, corporations must be able work with themselves. That is, every employee must be willing and able to function effectively with his or her colleagues and take their duties further than "just what is required" to leverage the collective potential of the firm into superior business performance.

This can't happen unless free communication and mutual trust are present within the workforce (Barker & Camarata, 1998). Not surprisingly then, the methods of communication your company employs as well as the manner in which those methods are carried out can have a large effect on both the process and results of your company's efforts to get the workforce engaged. In fact, the prominent role of communication— both formal and informal—in affecting engagement levels within the organization has long been recognized in both the academic and practitioner literatures. William Kahn, whose theory of engagement and disengagement at work revolutionized the conception of what it meant to be committed to one's work, recognized this in his 1990 study of camp counselors and architects.

Specifically, Kahn found that in an open environment—one in which information was shared freely among organizational members without fear and where meaningful communicative interactions occurred regularly—people were more willing to put all of themselves into their work. As one camp counselor put succinctly, people are only willing to devote their "energy where it will be appreciated" (Kahn, 1990: 708). When the groundwork for meaningful communication is missing, your employees' willingness to exert discretionary effort will be missing as well. Truly, as Richard Axelrod asserts, communication is the "lifeblood" of the living system that is the modern corporation (2000: 92).

The importance of effective communication doesn't stop here though. As anyone familiar with the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA) knows, more formal elements of internal communication are as important as any in ensuring that your company's employees are pushing the firm forward when they're at work. These formal elements translate to relatively straightforward goals—making sure that employees know what to do on the job, recognizing and acknowledging workers for superior performance, and facilitating a setting where discussion of performance and progress occur frequently—and help to satisfy the basic needs of employees with the effect of freeing them to focus on their work instead of the hurdles they have to face to perform it (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002).

More specifically, the satisfaction of basic needs encourages employees to make judgments based on a genuine concern for the collective rather than the pure economic calculations that would otherwise dominate. As Randolph Barker & Martin Camarata elucidate, this amounts to a shift from decision-making based on rational choice theory to a process centered on social exchange theory (1998). Under the former, employees will only exert effort to the extent that they expect a return on their actions while under the latter, employees' relationships within a work environment "will involve future reciprocity of an unlimited and unspecified positive nature" (Barker & Camarata, 1998: 447). The question, then, is how

do we get employees to move away from the economic concept of rationality to the model of social exchange that promises commitment that is unlimited by the immediate utility of a given action? The answer lies in the effective "use of communication at all levels and across all boundaries" (Barker & Camarata, 1998: 448).

The critical role of communication in achieving optimum engagement levels has also been highlighted by a recent study conducted by Watson Wyatt. In its 2006 analysis of employee engagement and its drivers, the consulting firm underlined communication as holding a key role in affecting the overall engagement level of employees:

> "Communication makes a positive difference in employee engagement. High-engagement employees receive communication from their supervisors and senior management far more frequently than low engagement employees."
>
> (Watson Wyatt, 2006)

Findings such as these, along with widespread recognition that engagement levels tend to correlate with positive business-level outcomes and financial performance, suggest that the communication methods employed by the organization—and their relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness in driving the engagement of the workforce—may have significant financial impact for firms.

Driving Engagement and Business Performance with Communication

In keeping with the value-profit chain laid out by Carrig & Wright, effective communication, as a subset of effective management practices, can drive employee satisfaction and engagement. A satisfied employee is more willing and able to take the steps necessary to ensure customer satisfaction, which itself drives customer loyalty and, finally, profitability and growth (Carrig & Wright, 2006).[1] Thus with a potential operational path for communication to affect firm-level performance laid out, the question of how to fine-tune internal communication to maximize your company's return on its engagement efforts presents itself.

Manage survey design and administration. According to Christopher Bennett, business development manager at the Vancouver-based 1-800-Got-Junk?, which has been ranked as the number one place to work in British Columbia by Watson Wyatt two years in a row, the questions asked on a survey and how they are presented will have a significant impact on that survey's ultimate usefulness. When the right questions are asked, employees gain "a forum to express views that wouldn't be expressed otherwise" (Dutton, 2006). Not only does this enable the firm to tackle problem issues before they become actual problems, but when used in conjunction with communication of survey results, it demonstrates to employees that management is actually committed to the workforce through its actions and functions to improve engagement.

As Sherry Whitely, senior vice president of human resources for Intuit, indicates, communication about surveys and action based on their results can turn around the operations of a business unit. In terms of engagement levels, the company's contact center was among the lowest rated units of its business in 2004. In response, the company followed a plan highlighted both by its pursuit of solutions in problem areas and communication with employees—"we had a lot more chats and took initiatives based on their feedback" (Dutton, 2006). As a result, the lagging contact center became one the highest rated segments of the firm in the following years.

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of the value-profit chain as it relates to employee engagement, please see "Old Wine in New Bottles? Engagement and the Bottom Line" elsewhere in this volume.

Make sure senior management is with HR and communicates that support. In its recent study of engagement in the workplace, Watson Wyatt found that not only did senior leaders appear to have much stronger influence than immediate supervisors in improving engagement through communication, but also that employees are largely losing confidence in the ability of senior managers to ensure the long-term competitiveness of their respective companies (Watson Wyatt, 2006). This contention is repeated by Roger D'Aprix, creator of "The Manager's Communication Model":

> "Usually, frontline or immediate managers get better marks for showing they care about people's needs. Senior leaders, further away from employees, don't do as well in surveys and other measurements. Not surprising, if you read today's business pages."
>
> (Gorman, 2003: 14)

The question of how to rebuild that apparently lost confidence while leveraging the greater potential of senior leadership to affect higher engagement levels across the organization can once again be answered with communication. For instance, the two-fold benefit of effective communication—the ability to rebuild confidence as well as increase engagement—is demonstrated by VSP, the largest provider of eye-care benefits in the U.S.

As part of the company's efforts to create and maintain high levels of employee satisfaction, the human resource function looked to the CEO for support, recognizing that its efforts would not reach their fullest potential "without total support from the top of the organization" (Leuchars, Harrington, & Erickson, 2003: 38). However, just getting support from senior leadership is not enough. It must be communicated, both explicitly and through action for it to mean something. At VSP, this translated to measures such as personal responses to employee e-mails about concerns, conducting focus groups, and casual chats between the CEO and employees over lunch in the company cafeteria.

Similar efforts have occurred at the Canada-based RBC Financial Group which was rated the country's "Most Respected Corporation" in 2003. Part of the journey to acquiring that title was the employment of open communication practices between senior leadership and the rest of the organization to instill confidence and trust as well as drive engagement. Considering the CEO and other senior leaders to be "communications champions", RBC took steps to ensure that the communication channels between the top of the organization and the mainline workforce were kept open and transparent through what they termed "say-do messages". These messages, communicated by top management, clearly delineate "what the company wants to do, and what will enable employee behaviour to get it done" (Beslin & Reddin, 2004: 3). The end result is the establishment of a "critical link to stakeholders" (ibid.) within the company with the added benefit that when stakeholders feel that their ideas and energies are being acknowledged, they are far more likely to contribute them both in- and outside of their formal, required work roles.

Rely on straightforward language. Perhaps one of the most off-putting attributes about the execution of HR initiatives is their proclivity to become bogged down with slogans and buzzwords that, rather than energize a company's communication efforts, often obscure meaning and do more to annoy than inform. As William Lutz, professor of English and "plain language consultant" indicates, use of such language does "everything but fulfill the function of communication" (Freedman, 2003). Instead of resorting to the use of such measures, Larkin & Larkin (1996), communication consultants, recommend communicating the facts of a situation and the facts alone.

Citing examples where company slogans are relentlessly mocked instead of embraced, the consultants recommend communicating values through behavior—that is, through actions—and leaving everything else to a straightforward discussion of what the company's intentions are, how employees will be affected, and why the current course of action is being taken (Larkin & Larkin, 1996). The success of VSP's efforts

to maximize employee satisfaction and engagement illustrate this point. Rather than employ a slogan or toss around buzzwords surrounding engagement, the company identified and focused on "a corporate commitment to make VSP a great company to work for" (Leuchars, et al., 2003: 35) and backed it up with action—continuing to invest in their employees' satisfaction even in the face of economic pressures. The result was not only the clear and efficient communication of the right message to the workforce—that the company was committed to its employees—but also a stronger and more pervasive message than any buzzword or corporate slogan could create.

Utilize appropriate channels. When it comes to communicating for engagement, the selection of which communication channels to use boils down to what most people already know—face-to-face communication is by far the most effective way to communicate anything of importance to employees. While technological advances have reduced the costs of communicating greatly and offer many benefits to those who choose to use them, an actual talk with someone means much more and will go much farther in demonstrating the commitment necessary on the part of the organization to breed high engagement in the workforce.

Perhaps the biggest culprit behind poor corporate communication is e-mail, due largely to its impersonal nature and rampant possibilities for misinterpretation. By and large, e-mail's recognition as a primary cause of communication problems within a company is widespread. For instance, Herb Greenberg, president and CEO of Caliper, indicates that "I want to outlaw it from my company," citing the unintended messages it sends and the consequences these create ranging from disputes over resources to people leaving the organization (Krell, 2006: 53). Roger D'Aprix is even more adamant, calling the implications of e-mail for corporate communication "horrendous" and continuing to cite the lack of "opportunity for an honest exchange of information with all the give and take that implies" (Gorman, 2003: 15).

Rather than e-mail, then, personal interaction and, if necessary, telephone conversations should be used when possible to communicate, especially between managers and their direct reports. The relative benefits of each form, at their most basic level, lie in each method's propensity to be misinterpreted. As suggested by Gail Gooden, a management psychologist at the consulting firm RHR International, "e-mail communications pose the greatest risk of unintended interpretation—followed by telephone and face-to-face exchanges, respectively" (Krell, 2006: 54). Add to this the fact that face-to-face exchange adds a personal element to communication and demonstrates commitment to the person your are talking to and you end up with pretty strong argument to meet with people whenever it's possible.

Leverage communication for inclusion. Quite possibly the easiest way to improve the engagement of your company's workforce through internal communication is simply to share as much information as is possible with them. Beyond creating a line-of-sight between their individual actions at work and the performance of the work-, business-unit, or company as a whole, the very act of giving transparent access to information to employees indicates two things. First, the company trusts its workforce enough to share privileged information and, second, that employee inputs and opinions are valued enough that management at all levels of the organization wants to hear what employees might like to add to the discussion.

Facing several market challenges after taking the helm of Sam Houston Electric in 2002, Kyle Kuntz instituted a sweeping reform of the company's communication processes that included a broad initiative aimed at inclusion across the organization:

"All of Sam Houston Electric employees were invited to become actively engaged in the communications process, whether they serve on the front line as member service representatives, are out in the field or working behind the scenes ensuring the smooth flow of operations. According to Mr. Kuntz, connected employees are satisfied

employees. And this connection is the direct result of two-way communication—between management and staff—about everything from the cooperative's priorities and objectives, to training and education, to member communications."

<div align="right">(Johnson, 2005: 53)</div>

As Carrig & Wright suggest, this type of information sharing and the connection it creates between employees and the business will allow workers to visualize the link between what they do and where the company is trying to go (2006: 66-67). The end result is a workforce that is better equipped and more willing to do what it takes to make the business not only succeed, but thrive.

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Axelrod, R.H. (2000). *Terms of engagement: changing the way we change organizations*. **San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc.**

Abstract: Focused on creating and maintaining successful organizational change, this book tackles subjects relating to the creation of engagement to drive the change necessary for business success. Additionally, four principles necessary to creating an engaged organization are discussed as are potential problems that may arise during implementation.

Barker, R.T., & Camarata, M.R. (1998). The role of communication in creating and maintaining a learning organization: preconditions, indicators, and disciplines. *The Journal of Business Communication*, **35(4): 443-467.**

Abstract: In this article, the importance of communication in creating and sustaining organizational learning and workforce engagement is discussed. After delineating how communication can affect a shift from employee actions based on rational-choice to social-exchange theory, the authors examine the preconditions necessary for an engaged learning organization to exist and present a case study of Kodak.

Beslin, R., & Reddin, C. (2004). How leaders can communicate to build trust. *Ivey Business Journal Online*, **November/December 2004: 1-6. Accessed at: <www.iveybusinessjournal.com>.**

Abstract: Examining how open and honest communication can create trust—and with it, engagement—among the workforce, this article gathers opinions from top minds in the practitioner realm regarding how good communication can forge a link between the firm and its internal stakeholders. In addition, the measurement and tracking of individual communication skills and abilities is considered.

Carrig, K. & Wright, P.M. (2006). *Building profit through people: making your workforce the strongest link in the value-profit chain*. **Alexandria, Virginia: Society for Human Resource Management.**

Abstract: This book provides an in-depth examination of how to link your employees with the bottom-line financial goals of profitability and growth. Beginning with the value-profit chain, which provides a model through which satisfied associates can drive business performance, the text describes how making people the firm's strongest asset can turn a failing company around. Special attention is given to how a people-focused strategy affected a turnaround at Continental along with practical information and examples of how that turnaround was achieved.

Dutton, G. (2006). What they're really saying. *Human Resource Executive Online,* **June 16, 2006. Accessed at: < http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=5669846>.**

Abstract: This article examines the finer points of designing, administrating, and positioning employee surveys. Among the suggestions discussed are the importance of asking the right questions; the effect of positioning the survey as a tool to help managers complete tasks on which they are already working; and the prime role of feedback in the surveying process.

Freedman, A. (2003). Communication collision, *Human Resource Executive Online***, October 2, 2003. Accessed at:**
< http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=4222051&query=buzzwords>

Abstract: This article focuses on the negative effects buzzwords have on the effectiveness of communication within the firm. Beginning with a discussion of the communicative shortcomings of such words, the article identifies some of the most often used buzzwords and considers the importance of considering the audience of corporate communication.

Gorman, B. (2003). Employee engagement after two decades of change. *Strategic Communication Management***, 7(1): 12-15.**

Abstract: In this interview with Roger D'Aprix, creator of "The Manager's Communication Model", changes in labor and product markets as well as their effects on management practices and engagement efforts are considered. Additionally, the value of connecting with employees on an emotional level is discussed as are the potential shortcomings of technology in creating effective communication practices.

Harter, J.K., Schmidt, F.L., & Keyes, C.L. (2002). Well-being in the workplace and its relationship to business outcomes: a review of the Gallup studies. In Keyes, C.L. & Hait, J. (Eds.), *Flourishing: the positive person and the good life* **(pp. 205-224). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.**

Abstract: Considering data collected by The Gallup Organization in its administration of the 12-question Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA), this study examines performance differences between firms among companies based on their quartile rank on the GWA. The authors conclude that significant performance differences do exist between these firms and that these are significantly associated with engagement measures. They conclude that engagement is likely a leading indicator of performance outcomes but that the causal direction of its effect (e.g., the potential for a reciprocal interaction) is undetermined.

Johnson, S. (2005). Improving member satisfaction through strategic communications. *Management Quarterly***, Spring 2005: 48-55.**

Abstract: Focusing on communication efforts as they occurred within Sam Houston Electric Cooperative Association, this article explores how a top-down communication strategy improved engagement within the company's widely varying employee base. Specifically, the critical contributions to be gained from soliciting employee input and the creation of line-of-sight between employee behavior and business performance are discussed.

Kahn, W.A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal***, 33(4): 692-724.**

Abstract: Using two studies of summer camp counselors and architects, this article lays out the theory behind engagement and considers the psychological conditions—meaningfullness, safety, and availability—linked to its manifestation in the individual. Additionally, the subject of personal disengagement is discussed.

Krell, E. (2006). The unintended word. *HR Magazine***, 51(8): 50-54.**

Abstract: This article presents an in-depth examination of the hidden and unintended messages that often accompany corporate communication efforts. Citing the negative effects such messages can have on

turnover, morale, and productivity, Krell presents several steps to minimize both the frequency of such messages and their effects within the firm.

Larkin, T.J., & Larkin, S. (1996). Reaching and changing frontline employees. *Harvard Business Review***, May-June 1996: 95-104.**

Abstract: Considering communication in the context of organizational change, this article espouses the importance of communicating values through action. After presenting specific examples of corporate communication campaigns gone wrong, the authors discuss the critical role played by front-line managers in creating an engaged workforce that supports the performance goals of the organization.

Leuchars, E., Harrington, S., & Erickson, C. (2003). Putting people first: how VSP achieves high employee satisfaction year after year. *Journal of Organizational Excellence***, Spring 2003: 33-41.**

Abstract: Using the optical healthcare provider VSP as a case study, this article centers on how the company created and maintained engagement in spite of rapid growth and the tripling of its workforce. Specifically considered are the company's efforts to track employee satisfaction and the importance of CEO involvement in company-wide communication initiatives. Additionally, the roles of training & development as well as rewards & benefits are discussed.

Watson Wyatt. (2006). "WorkUSA 2006/2007: debunking the myths of employee engagement: executive   summary".   www.watsonwyatt.com.   Accessed   March,   2006   at: <http://www.watsonwyatt.com/research/resrender.asp?id=2006-CA-0039&page=1> .

Abstract: This brief discussion of the results of a study conducted by Watson Wyatt makes the argument that many firms overestimate the importance of managers in driving employee engagement. Additionally, the paper posits that engagement is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for business success while also suggesting that strong leaders in senior positions are far more important to driving engagement than an employee's immediate supervisor.

Yates, Catherine. Internal communication effectiveness enhances bottom-line results. *Journal of Organizational Excellence,* **Summer 2006: 71-79.**

Abstract: Using recent research by consulting firm Watson Wyatt as a basis, this article considers the positive impacts effective internal communication can have on proximal business and HR outcomes as well as bottom-line financial performance. In addition, Yates presents key actions—follow a formal process, use employee inputs, and integrate total rewards, among others—to maximize communication effectiveness within the firm.

Questions for Discussion

How effective is communication within your company? What parts of your communication efforts are better than your competitors'? What are the greatest hurdles you encounter in communicating HR initiatives?

To what extent do you focus on the positioning of surveys within your company? Is positioning as important as creating a good survey or is it "nice to have" but essentially unnecessary?

What communication channels—email, video, town hall meetings, face-to-face discussion, etc.—do you find to be most effective within your organization? Does the answer to this question change with your audience or is it consistent across all employee groups?

How does your organization link the efforts of HR with the support of executive-level management and the CEO? What methods are most effective in achieving this goal?