Are Your Employees Giving You the Silent Treatment?

The more you hear from them, the stronger your organization will be. Here are four steps to effective employee communication.

By Linda Keefe

In any organization, communication between managers and employees is a big issue. Employees want guidelines from their supervisors, and managers want input from their team. And while most organizations have little trouble filtering information down the layers, they do have challenges when it comes to filtering information up. That's because too many employees stay quiet about what they need, resulting in missed opportunities, delayed projects, and failed initiatives.

The reasons for such a communication gap are numerous, ranging from employees thinking, "I don't want to appear incompetent" to "Who am I to offer ideas to management?" Because they know managers are busy with long-term planning and strategic initiatives, many employees don't want to interrupt with details of day-to-day activities. Without that knowledge, however, managers have a hard time

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gauging whether they're leading the organization effectively.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to help employees communicate better and keep the organization's progress on track. The key is to build a quality interaction between the employee group and the management team. When you break through the barriers and get employees and managers working together, you help everyone understand the effort it takes to advance the organization's strategic vision and attain goals. Without support from every member in the group, your organization's progress suffers and ultimately reduces results.

To instill confidence in your employees and encourage them to contribute, apply the four elements of shared knowledge — a process that

can transform your entire organization. This unique combination of elements includes organizational communication, skills, motivation, and empowerment. Below are ways to use these four vital components to get your employees to communicate their needs so they can help the organization grow and prosper.

1. Communicate Needs

Communication is a two-way process and a shared responsibility. Employees have just as much responsibility for speaking up, for setting expectations and requirements, and for communicating barriers and opportunities as does the management team. When you encourage employees to communicate with the senior team, you're helping each group understand the other's job duties and what each reasonably can and cannot do given the budget and expectations.

Ask your employees to tell the management team what they're

struggling with and what managers can do to help. Reinforce the organization's vision and state how the current objectives contribute to it, and then explain that you need the employees' input to make attaining the vision a reality.

2. Share Skills and Knowledge

While most people are knowledgeable about and skilled in their particular job duties, many managers are unaware of their employees' daily activities. Encourage your employees to educate you about their job specifics. Ask them to explain what goes into each successful project by listing all the actions and costs, including time costs.

Make it a dialogue in which you and your employees discuss which ideas and actions have worked in the past. Go over survey results, client satisfaction ratings, safety metrics, and any other factual data that would begin a dialogue. Ask questions to get your employees to offer suggestions about the present situation. For example, you might say, "Last year we increased programs by 35% and we had a 15% increase in funding resources. With only a 10% increase in funding resources this year and a 5% staff reduction, what kind of results do you anticipate we'll get, and what resources will you need to overcome any hurdles?"

As you listen to the feedback, offer tradeoffs, such as: "If we allocate more funding to programs, can you increase clients served by another 5%?" This will help employees see the impact on overall performance and prompt them to get involved in the decision process.

3. Create a Motivation Cycle

Your input plays a big part in motivating employees to communicate with you and reach goals. Make communicating with management easy. Some suggestions to consider:

• **Arrange a group conference call** so employees can share their

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ideas about a project or strategic plan.

• **Send employees** a personal thank-you note for a job well done, complete with the management team's signatures.

• **Set a half day aside** to conduct round-table discussions with employees that address their concerns.

• **Offer short, 10-minute one-on-one sessions** between managers and employees to discuss employee issues.

• **Have managers sit with employees** during breaks or at lunch to discuss organization issues.

When employees see you and other managers taking an interest in their responsibilities, they'll be excited to complete their tasks to the best of their ability. The senior team's interest will show that each employee's contribution is integral to the organization's strategic initiative. Employees will actively seek out new and creative ideas to advance the organization and will share those ideas with you. The result will be a great increase in the organization's effectiveness.

4. Establish Empowerment Expectations

Empowerment is about setting expectations. You and your team need to have a common understanding, and you need to document it. Take a lesson from Ken Blanchard's *One Minute Manager:* Write a one-minute goal and the requirements in half a page or less. For example, you might say, "We want to increase our programs this

year by 30%. To accomplish this, the team needs a $___ development budget, a monthly planning meeting with all employees and managers, and an increase in staff by ____%."

Discuss the goals and parameters with everyone involved before you begin delegating tasks so that as a team you can make the needed tradeoffs to ensure a successful outcome. When people know the specifics of what's required, they're empowered to create the desired results. Always remember that the entire interaction hinges on communication, and the quality of the communication determines how empowered you and your team are.

Results Now

If you want to encourage your employees to communicate openly, you need to show why open communication from both sides is so vital to the organization's success. Make it a shared responsibility for everyone to educate one another, express what they need, and show how specific duties affect the bottom line. The more active everyone is in the communication process, the more efficient your team will be and the greater success you will all attain.■

Resources

Henderson-Loney, Jane, "Shared Leadership: A New Model," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 14, No. 5.

McKay, Shona, "Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change, *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 13, No. 3.

Neck, Christopher & Robert Ashcraft, "Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 18, No. 3.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

Linda Keefe is CEO and co-founder of Shared Results International (linda keefe@sharedresults.com, www.share dresults.com), a consulting and training firm that transforms organizations. Linda speaks and facilitates retreats on achieving faster growth and higher productivity.