

You Cannot NOT Communicate

By [Elizabeth Black](#)

Here's a business conundrum.

What activity do businesses say they spend countless hours and investment in and employees say is never enough?

The answer: communications

Why is it that organizations don't seem to be making much progress in effective communications, judging by employee surveys and feedback sessions, often conducted as part of gauging employee satisfaction?

The explanation might become clearer if we look at the communication process surrounding the merger of two multinational companies.

Soon after the executive team of a major telecommunications company announced to its shareholders its intent to merge with the number two company in its industry, the executive team lead by its CEO, scheduled a company-wide video broadcast to all its employees. Employees gathered together in their local offices and heard about the reasons for the merger, the benefits that would be generated by combining the two companies and the high-level timetable of events. Later that day, every employee received an email summarizing the video broadcast. Every manager received a PowerPoint presentation and was instructed to use the PowerPoint at departmental meetings to communicate the facts about the merger.

Two weeks later, Yolanda, the Corporate Director of Sales and Marketing, called Max, the Manager of the Customer Service Administrative team and one of Yolanda's direct reports. Yolanda asked Max to come to her office for a meeting since she was very concerned that he had already processed five voluntary terminations from his staff, and she suspected that the terminations were connected to the news of the merger.

When Yolanda asked Max about the reasons for the resignations, Max explained that two individuals had found new jobs; one decided to become a stay-at-home mom; and two left to return to school. When Yolanda pressed further, Max admitted that all this merger talk was consuming his staff, and he felt powerless to do anything about it.

Yolanda pointed out to Max that he just lost one third of his staff and that the cost of backfilling these roles would be significant, if they could find people, and the impact to their internal customer service could very well be significant. She went on to ask Max if he had taken the time to talk with his team about the merger, using the materials corporate had provided.

Max smirked and said, "Yes, I gave them printed copies of the PowerPoint since our projector didn't work that day, and we didn't have a long meeting because we were behind in completing our weekly reports. It wouldn't have mattered, though. Most of my team just put the copies in the recycling bin on the way out the door. They all

know our jobs are going away when the new company is formed, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Yolanda was astounded by Max's attitude and behavior, but, even more importantly, she wondered why everyone's best intentions in support of merger communications went so far awry.

Max, Yolanda and probably countless other managers faced with significant communication challenges made at least three mistakes. What should they have done to ensure effective communications?

Personalize the Messages

No matter how often leaders explain the benefit to the organization of the strategy or the changes to the company, the messages will be little more than corporate-speak unless the messages are tailored to specific audiences. Everyone who hears about this merger, for example, will be wondering about the impact to him. How will her job change? What will he be asked to do differently after the merger? Will she have a new manager? Be part of a bigger team, or a smaller team? Have more access to technology? Be required to make more use of technology?

Additionally, effective communications tries to answer the WIIFM question (What's in it for me?) for all those who will be receiving the communications. Although this may sound selfish, it really is about helping employees see the benefit to them of organizational decisions so that they fully embrace the new ways of working and can contribute to the organizational goals more quickly and with a deeper commitment.

If Max had taken the time to personalize the messages about the merger and its impact upon his team, his employees might have learned about opportunities for additional training or new opportunities to transfer to other departments if their work were to be reduced. They might also have been asked to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity while the merger details were being worked out. They undoubtedly would not have all the answers to their questions, but they would know more than they did when they left the office that day.

Ensure That Verbal and Non-Verbal Communications Are Congruent

It might have been difficult for Max to express positive enthusiasm for the merger if he did not fully understand or agree with it. However, as a manager, he has an obligation to gain a complete understanding and to help translate the rationale and the benefits to his team. His team is not only listening to what he says about the business and the impact to them, but they are also watching to see what his body language tells them. Non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expression, tone of voice) often speaks louder than words. In fact, studies show that listeners gain more information from non-verbal communication than from the words that are spoken. If Max's snickering to Yolanda was carried over to his team or other body-language indicated his indifference or disdain for the organizational changes, even engaging his team in a discussion of the impact and WIIFM might not have achieved the desired effect. If Max's verbal and non-verbal messages were incongruent, they would, at the very least, have been confusing--at the worst, disbelieved.

Two-Way Communication Is Best

Another classic communication mistake that many managers make is to do too much telling and not enough asking. The executive team as well as Yolanda and Max gave thought to the content of the video and the power points. They ensured that key messages were made available to all employees. They explained the merger and as many facts as they could share. They even provided FAQs (frequently asked questions) as handouts to managers, BUT they didn't build in mechanisms to allow employees to ask their own questions, in their own words, at the time they were ready to ask them. Nor did they allow employees opportunities to provide feedback or suggestions on any topics related to the merger. Of course, the executive team cannot ask the employees whether or not the merger should be undertaken, but they would be wise to provide channels for feedback on how to get their teams engaged and excited about the change or any barriers that the employees might be able to anticipate that others may not.

Two-way communication requires listening, explaining, asking, challenging and, most importantly, dialog--a communication process that uses both telling and asking for maximum exploration of the topic at hand.

Yolanda should have engaged Max in two-way communications instead of sending him off with the corporate materials and waiting until she heard of any difficulties. Max, too, should have spent time with his team asking for questions or concerns and taking them back to Yolanda or others. By opening a dialog with his team, Max could have demonstrated that he was concerned about what they were thinking and feeling, and he might have been able to talk through options with the employees who later resigned. Two-way communication may not have stopped the resignations, but then, how would Max and Yolanda know if they had not tried to understand their employees' concerns? Should they have done more asking than telling?

Looking back on the situation at this company, there was a great deal of communication going on. In fact, the executive team was frustrated that the employees said that communications needed to be improved. What was being communicated was neither fully heard nor fully understood. It may also not have been fully embraced.

The lessons learned for managers everywhere are to make communications work by making them personal, congruent, and two-way.

As the executives, Yolanda and Max learned, possibly the hard way, we cannot NOT communicate, and the surveys are often right--we need to work to get better at employee communications.

How close is your organization to solving the communications conundrum? What can you do about it? Are you willing to try?

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