Developing Effective Communications in a Business

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By Warren J. Rutherford
As interviewed by David Wright

Q 1 – Why did you decide to write about "developing effective communications in a business?"

A – In my professional career I have found that in each and every situation where I focused on developing effective communications between and among management, supervisors, employees, and our customers; the business was more effective, more efficient, and significantly more productive.

In every business there is a necessity to communicate with others in order for that business to be successful – however success is defined for that business. The necessity to communicate can be wrapped around a person's perspective, his motivation, his professional standards, and even his personality.

As human beings we learn to communicate at a very early age. As adults in a business setting we need to continually relearn how to communicate effectively in that business in order to satisfy both our own internal needs for acceptance and growth and for the business' need for achieving its success.

Q 2 – Is there an example of how the results of effective communications can be described?

A – Certainly. There is one defining example early in my professional career that stands as an excellent illustration. My first professional position was as a Manpower Planner in an employment and training agency. A major performance measure by which the agency was judged successful was its participant placement rate. That is, if you trained 10 persons to be cooks, and you placed 3 of them in full time positions, you would achieve a 30% placement rate.

My agency had a placement rate for all its employment and training programs of approximately 12% when I started work with them. My director challenged me to increase that rate during my first month on the job. Youth being my advantage and intuition my guide I established a 40% placement rate as the agency goal at the end of my first full year implementation of the manpower plan I was charged to develop.

I established that goal because I discovered several things about my fellow employees – they were all bright, motivated to achieve the agency's mission, talented, and, most importantly, lacking in a "glue" that bound them together – a business communication process that could be developed, reinforced, and implemented effectively and consistently over time.

I set out to develop that "glue" in order to achieve our goals.

Q 3 – How precisely did you develop that "glue?"

A – Quite simply actually. There were 45 people in the agency. I took the time necessary to develop a relationship with each of them – the secretaries, the job counselors, the intake staff, and the director. I wanted to learn what they liked, disliked, what they were motivated by, when and why they had fun, what did they want to contribute to the agency and why, and what they hoped to do after they had achieved their objectives at the agency – their future dreams and ambitions. You might say I asked them so many questions that they had to answer me!

Simply put, the business communication process required that we develop an understanding of each person's professional and personal perspective before we could mix the ingredients together and create a series of goals to which we could aspire.

Simple, but yet a good amount of effort, especially where my fellow employees had not previously been encouraged to share their perspectives. There was initial resistance from those in the agency who thought it better to just "set the goal, and tell them to achieve it." Since I was not intuitively autocratic I did not follow the approach suggested, but did not say so, in so many words. Let's just say I smiled and went about my business.

Q 4 – How did you make sure that the "glue" held beyond your initial efforts?

A – Now, this is where I had the most fun. You see developing a business communications strategy for the agency required that we all participate in the goal-setting process. The goal itself was fine; no one disagreed with having one. The question each of the staff had was how we would need to reposition and refocus ourselves to make sure we achieved the goal.

The "glue" then took on several characteristics – organizational restructuring, job restructuring to leverage the most prominent talents of our respective staff members, retooling our recruitment and intake strategy to ensure we would be able to encourage our program participants to achieve success, challenging our job development staff to work more affirmatively with potential employers to encourage them to hire our well-trained participants, and freeing up our staff to work beyond their job descriptions and use their intuition to maximize their work efforts.

Once I had that opportunity to talk individually with each of our staff and I understood what truly motivated each of them and why, I then had the capability of transforming the business strategy to match and mirror the natural abilities of our staff and to create an environment where they were not only aligned with their interests; they were also more aligned with each other.

To me, effective business communications is that key that unlocks the door to lasting organizational development and change.

We developed a mission, a vision, specific and measurable objectives, strategies to achieve those objectives, a specific series of actions, including a set of procedures to review, discuss, modify, and implement what we had developed. In essence, we developed accountability systems – job descriptions, methods to implement our programs, evaluate our successes (and failures), and processes to continuously improve them.

Q 5 – You mentioned earlier that every business, to be successful, needs effective communication procedures, how do you begin to identify that effectiveness?

Does the business have a mission, a vision, a set of values, and a purpose? Does the owner know it, breath it, believe it, and convincingly live it? Do the employees know it, breath it, believe it, and convincingly live it? Do the customers know it, understand it, and are they attracted to the business and want to do business with it because it aligns with their values? Who participated in the development of these – was it top-down, bottom-up, or some synthesis of the two?

These are some of the very first questions I will ask a business owner, department managers, employees, and customers.

If you agree that a well-developed mission, vision, set of values, and purpose is based on an aligned workforce – it does impute that effective business

communications exist, for without these, there would be little agreement on those all-important corporate statements.

When this initial process is concluded I then ask a series of questions to individuals at various levels of the business. I observe communications in meetings, between staff and customers, and between superiors and subordinates. This is an observation not only of verbal communication but non-verbal as well.

Body language, dress, attentiveness – all help you understand whether there is alignment in communications – and whether there is a solid groundwork for true interpersonal communication to occur – that is – words spoken by the sender are understood by the receiver and the meaning of those understood words are communicated from the receiver back to the sender.

Q 6 – How do you move beyond the identification phase and move towards improving business communications?

When I am conducting that initial screening audit I am beginning to understand the business culture. I can identify where individual inclinations toward change are. I can identify why there are interests to change. The change could be a need for setting goals, establishing accountability, or establishing a system for process change, to name a few.

As I begin to identify these inclinations I also begin to sample test their acceptance by others. In this phase I most often offer suggestive statements such as: "John do you think it would be beneficial for the company to set a benchmark for performance improvement?" While the benchmark idea was offered by another employee I do not present it that way. More often than not John would not initially ascribe that idea to Jane, the idea's originator. In fact, John may not even think Jane could care about benchmarking systems. This process is what I refer to as "getting people on the same page."

If John thinks it is a good idea I continue to test for acceptance from key influencers and key decision makers. As confluence of acceptance increases (which it usually does by the way since most of the ideas are common sense, well thought out, and meaningful to the productivity of the company) I will "suggest" that a key influencer or decision maker advance the idea in his discussions with others. In this phase it is important to note that "taking credit for the idea" only becomes important if Jane has the personality type that needs to have that credit acknowledged. Otherwise, the idea often gets legs of its own and Jane becomes quite happy, usually quietly sharing her joy with me. She has also learned there are different ways to get things done.

This may sound oversimplified until you look at the logic – I seek to make simple, logical connections – connecting the dots – to create consensus. Building small, in a variety of different idea areas – but strategic idea areas – can positively influence employee and ownership confidence to build upon these small successes. I consciously seek to develop incremental building blocks on a firm communication foundation.

I should note at this point that I am cognizant of both the formal and informal communication channels within a business. I look for both, try to understand what works well, why, and when; as well as trying to understand what does not work well, why, and when. By understanding these channels and patterns it also helps to create systematic solutions that reinforce productive and discourage unproductive channels and patterns – both the formal and the informal.

The development of an effective communication process is straightforward. There is a constant need to create and to then maintain an environment within the business where ownership, management, employees, and customers understand and embrace that it is acceptable to ask questions, to advance ideas without fear of recrimination, and to maintain that environment through a systematic approach towards the effective channeling of ideas.

This is best developed through a clear discussion and agreement during a values discussion. It is then reinforced by example on a continual basis. Since examples have been developed through prior interviews, these can be introduced as validations toward the benefit of a change in the existing culture, values, and business environment. It continues to be reinforced through training, polite reminders, and regular and timely feedback discussions amongst small groups of employees to identify how to fine tune, revise, and improve.

For example, with one of my clients the CEO issued an email to all staff in which he instructed them in very stern terms that he and the company would no longer tolerate the use of the company's email system for personal correspondence amongst employees. He did not offer an explanation to his employees; he simply indicated the practice would cease. Immediately questions began to circulate with employees. What occurred to instigate this change? Did someone do something wrong? Informal discussions at the "water cooler" started to proliferate for several days until this informal communication channel reached the CEO. Now he had to clarify, formally. He sent a company-wide email which indicated that the reason behind his instruction was an article he had read recently in a business magazine. He conceded he acted out of haste and should have put more THOUGHT into the written word prior to hitting send. There were no incidents, no transgressions. He just thought it would be a

good idea to institute. Oh, and before he sent the formal email, he preceded it with an informal message at the "water cooler" advising that nothing was wrong.

Q 7 – You mentioned the importance of understanding each person's perspective, his motivation, his professional standards, and even his personality; why is it important and how do you identify these characteristics?

I am sure you have heard the phrase – the sum of all its parts. Well, each person is the sum of all his parts. Each organization is the sum of all its employees' parts. A social set is created when at least one person interacts with another. The interaction becomes increasingly positive and productive the more effort is expended in understanding the perspective, motivation, standards, and personality of the other party to the social set.

When I was the CEO to several organizations I deliberately used a concept of "building on a firm foundation." That foundation was and still is people. No matter what business we are in, we are in the people business. In order for our business to experience maximum performance we need to maximize our efforts to understand each others perspective, motivations, standards, and personality.

There is however, a more subtle reason for this being important. Asking or inquiring of another person his perspective, his motivation, his professional standards – in a way that is comfortable, unassuming, respectful, and sincere shows respect for that other person. Showing respect and caring about another helps to create a strong interpersonal bond that, once created, is difficult to dissemble.

Q 8 – Do you consider how different persons can attach different meanings to the same words, and how do you accommodate that in your discovery process?

Absolutely. Earlier I mentioned how to identify when effective communications occur – that is, words spoken by the sender are understood by the receiver and the meaning of those understood words are communicated from the receiver back to the sender. Oftentimes parts of this basic process are not followed, leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

During my discussions with owners, staff, and customers I will often ask them to repeat or clarify their statement by asking a question preceded by words similar to this – "Thank you, does that mean that you are…?" Depending on their answer, a yes or a no, I will ask them to clarify, provide a more complete description, or to give an example to illustrate their meaning.

There are several objectives to this exercise – to show respect to the sender by giving feedback on his intent, seek affirmation of meaning by asking a confirming question, and providing him an opportunity to provide a more complete understanding to me of his words.

I should mention that depending on an individual's personality type he may be more or less inclined to listen effectively. He may be very good at communicating what he wants, what he thinks, and why; but may have poorly developed listening habits. When I encounter people with these inclinations I make an extra effort to help them to listen better. Usually I will ask questions that seek clarification of mine or other people's word meanings, such as "Don, do you think Jane said…when she responded to your comment?"

The effort here is to help the receiver pause, think, and then respond. This effort to pause requires the receiver to think about the question in a way that requires a thoughtful response. For those with significant listening challenges this process needs to be repeated a number of times and reinforcing mechanisms need to be established. Usually those reinforcing mechanisms are best implemented by the person's co-workers (and they are usually the ones who cue me into the observation that Don is not a very good listener).

As mentioned previously the development of informal and formal systems and procedures often assists the organization's members to improve communications when situations as this are encountered on a regular basis. It is fair to mention that we all need a friendly reminder to listen more and talk less. When you see someone who acknowledges this comment with a smile and agreement, they are usually the ones who will need to apply these listening reinforcers, and yes, always with a return smile.

Q 9 – We clearly are moving into a more electronic, social networking – based communication, how do you adapt the practices you have developed towards online socially networked business communications?

A great question – and a great challenge. Up to now I have been discussing verbal communications, non-verbal and verbal cues – body language, dress, and attentiveness are a few examples. When we venture into a discussion of written words and communication the application of some of the practices I have developed do fit, yet they are communicated a bit differently.

I will give an example. Recently I joined social networking site – Facebook, at the request of one of my mentees. Once on Facebook I listed my high school and college information and the years attended. Well, almost instantly the site informed me of possible matches, including one of my friends from high school and college with whom I had lost contact. I "wrote on his wall" a greeting, and mentioned I had recently spoken to his best friend, which I had. The reply I received was quite insulting and surprising. I politely replied – "Thank you for your comments, does that mean you do not want me to write you further?" When I received his reply he indicated that he thought I was his best friend.

This example illustrates how misunderstanding of written words can lead to ineffective communication. Had we spoken over the phone he would have the benefit of friendly banter back and forth. Reading text via a computer screen can be somewhat impersonal. We have read about email protocol, if you want to shout, type in CAPS.

I would suggest adapting the methods in online settings with a positive and caring mind set – that is - words written by the sender are understood by the receiver and the meaning of those understood words are communicated from the receiver back to the sender in writing. Try to establish a commitment to communicate effectively by showing respect to the sender. Ask clarifying questions, make inquiries before assumptions, ask follow-up questions, and write in the positive.

Additionally it helps to ensure that the senders and the receivers utilize effective grammar, punctuation, and spelling. I encourage a reread before hitting the "send" button. Request a reply by a time certain in a positive tone that references spoken conversation, such as "I look forward to *hearing* your *thoughts* in this regard." In this way you encourage in the receiver the thought of a verbal conversation and reply that he can then reduce to writing.

Q 10 – What steps should a business consider reviewing when seeking to determine how it can increase the effectiveness of its in-house and its online social networking communications?

We have reviewed many of them already. It is helpful to review several of the precursors to these steps.

- First, it is important to understand the importance of effective organizational communications to an organization's productivity and profit;
- Second, we need to communicate effectively in order to for each person and business to be successful;
- Third, we need to appreciate that each person has a unique perspective, motivation, professional standards, and personality that effects his communication practices; and
- Fourth, we must understand that effective communication requires constant interest in and attention to learning how to communicate more effectively in a personal and in a business setting.

Here are four steps to take to review the effectiveness of your organization's communications.

1. Review the organization's corporate mission, vision, values, and purpose. Review goals, objectives, strategies, and action plans.
   a. Are these in writing?
   b. Ask a representative sampling of C-level executives, managers, supervisors, staff, and customers of their understanding of and commitment to these.
   c. Is there alignment?
2. Observe discussions during a typical staff or management meeting.
   a. Is there an agenda – is it followed?
   b. Are there any people who are not participating in the discussion?
   c. Are there a variety of body movements, facial expressions, verbal interruptions, etc. when certain people are speaking?
   d. Is there a meeting leader and does he make an effort to engage each person in the discussion?
   e. Are decisions during these meetings made, and, if so, are they made by consensus, by vote? How will someone be able to express his approval or disapproval?
   f. Does the meeting have a start and stop time; does it start and stop on time?
3. Ask a representative sampling of C-level executives, managers, supervisors, staff, and customers the following –
   a. If there is one area where you think we can improve communications in this company what would it be and why do you suggest that? Please be specific.
4. Review a representative sampling of C-level executives, managers, supervisors, and staff online communications and determine if each

communication is clear, understandable, grammatically correct with correct punctuation and spelling, and does the person request a reply by a time certain in a positive tone?

Q 11 – Going forward, what would you identify as the top 3 business communications practices a business should utilize to constantly monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of its communication practices?

1. Conduct a quarterly review across the organization on goals, objectives, strategies, and action plans – facilitate a dialogue that seeks to identify if ALL points of view, perspectives, etc are incorporated and respected.

2. Conduct a quarterly sampling C-level executives, managers, supervisors, staff, and customers and ask them the following – If there is one area where you think we can improve communications in this company what would it be and why do you suggest that? Please be specific.

3. Review a representative sampling of C-level executives, managers, supervisors, and staff online communications and determine if each communication is clear, understandable, grammatically correct with correct punctuation and spelling, and does the person request a reply by a time certain in a positive tone?

These practices do repeat some of the initial steps mentioned previously. A colleague long ago provided advice I still seek to follow – KEEP IT SIMPLE. Our communication practices do not need complexity – they do need to follow respectful, common sense, and practical procedures.