

Communication

Share openly, listen actively, and communicate honestly

What do you believe is your most important role as a manager or leader? Communication, communication, communication.

Just as the Coxswain must maintain a high level of clarity to keep his or her crew moving forward in the race, your ability to gain trust and build sound relationships depends on the effectiveness of your communication. Think about it...whether talking to a customer, negotiating with a supplier, or working with your people, communication provides the basis for all interaction and understanding.

You set the tone and create an environment of openness and trust for your team or organization. And, if you want your people to share their thoughts and opinions and exchange information and knowledge, it begins with you.

Your leadership and communication will determine how engaged your people are in their work and their level of commitment to overall success. Whether they need direction, motivation, clarity, your time, honesty, understanding, etc., the primary skill you deploy is...communication. This is true whether you are:

- Clarifying direction
- Setting expectations
- Discussing problems and potential solutions
- Providing coaching
- Conducting meetings
- Sharing feedback
- Recognizing performance contributions

What’s happening in reality?

In a Ken Blanchard Group study of fourteen hundred leaders and managers, here’s how they rated communication and management responsibilities:

43 percent feel the most critical skill of a leader is communicating and listening

41 percent feel inappropriate use of communication or listening is the biggest mistake leaders make

82 percent feel leaders and managers fail to provide appropriate feedback

81 percent fail to listen or involve others in the process

76 percent fail to set clear goals and objectives

Nearly 6 of 10 fail to train and develop their people

Unfortunately, I am not surprised with these results. During my years in management consulting, communication posed the single greatest challenge for organizations, departments, and teams. With communication being such an integral part of our lives, why have people failed to master it...even after years of practice?

The need for effective communication has increased over the past few decades, with the shift toward collaboration, empowerment, teams, and partnerships. Conversations once held between managers and their direct reports now take place amongst team members, cross functional groups, and strategic partners. This increase in communication is critical to successfully address the ongoing challenges that organizations face, both today and in the future.

The availability and dissemination of information has long been a topic of discussion in many organizations. For many years, information was kept and shared only at senior-management levels. Decisions were made at the management level, and employees were expected to implement the programs and changes handed down.

The dissemination of information was born as people got involved in running the day-to-day business and decision-making moved closer to the customer. The questions became, “What information should be shared?” “With whom?” “Do we run the risk of proprietary information falling into the wrong hands?” “How much, and what information do members of the organization need to do their jobs effectively?”

And, now, the questions surround the many forms of communication. “What technology should we include in our communication infrastructure? Do social media have a place in our ongoing communication needs? What boundaries do we need to put in place to ensure technology adds value to our organization?”

An excellent way to maximize communication is to develop and implement a communication plan.

How effective is communication throughout your organization?

Take a few minutes to complete the following self-assessment.

First, decide which group you will assess. The organization? A department? A team? Now, keep this group “top of mind,” as you proceed through the self-assessment. Your ratings will identify conditions that contribute to effective communication and pinpoint areas that need additional focus and attention.

The Self-Assessment includes ten pairs of statements that represent factors that contribute to establishing and maintaining a sound communication process. Read the statement in the left-hand and right-hand column for each contributing factor. Place an “x” on the scale of one to seven that indicates where you view the team, department, or organization *today* in relationship to the two statements. If you find that part of the description rates higher and part lower, plot the lower rating on the scale of one to seven.

Here is an example of one pair of statements, and the rating scale:

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:	WHERE WE ARE	WHERE WE NEED TO BE
Communication: Communication is guarded, resulting in minimal involvement in addressing and resolving issues.	<p style="text-align: center;"> x </p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p>	Communication: A high level of openness and honesty allows members to share information, ideas, and opinions to address and resolve issues

If you decided to have other people participate in the self-assessment process, keep this in mind: People generally believe that their team or organization falls into a high-performing category. However, when I have facilitated the self-assessment process, I’ve noticed that, as groups review the summary of their individual ratings, they are astonished to find they’ve rated themselves extremely low. They even suggest that they must have been thinking about the organization when they applied the rating—certainly not their team.

When this situation became a barrier to moving forward with plans and actions to improve the team’s effectiveness, I had them retake the self-assessment, being sure to focus on their team or group. In every situation, the overall ratings came out the same or lower than the original assessment.

The moral of the story:

- Ensure that everyone participating in the self-assessment is clear about which group he or she is assessing.
- Assure them that the overall assessment simply provides a starting point for developing plans and implementing actions that will increase the team or group’s effectiveness.

If participants tell you, “It’s tough settling on a rating,” it’s likely they feel that the group does well against some parts of the description and not so well against others.

As a result, they have a tough time assigning a rating. Share the following example, which will help them feel more comfortable applying a rating.

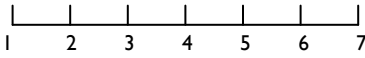
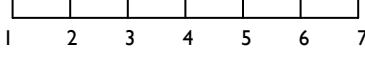
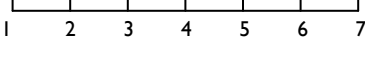
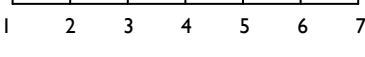
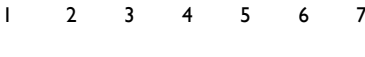

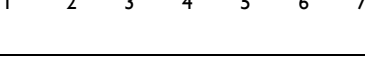
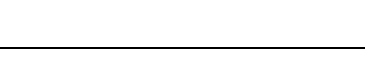
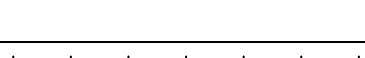

As you read the statements in the left-hand and right-hand columns, let’s say you believe that overall employee communication is guarded (a 2 rating), but managers seem to be honest in their communication (a 5 rating). Members share little responsibility for addressing issues (a 3 rating). There is a need for more open communication (a 2 rating). You just came up with two 2s one 3, and one 5 rating.

As you select an overall rating for this contributing Factor, “err on the low side” to ensure that areas receiving 2 and 3 ratings get addressed. In this example, you may choose to give Problem Solving an overall rating of 2.5

Now, take a few minutes to complete the “power10” self-assessment on the following page for your organization or team.

Communication Assessment for: _____
 (i.e. ABC Company, Sales Department, Financial Team)

Read the statements in the left-hand and right-hand columns for each of the ten Contributing Factors. Place an “x” on the scale of one to seven that indicates where you view the team, department, or organization *today* in relationship to the two statements.

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR	WHERE WE ARE	WHERE WE NEED TO BE
Communication: Communication is guarded, resulting in minimal involvement in addressing and resolving issues.		Communication: A high level of openness and honesty allows members to share information, ideas, and opinions to address and resolve issues.
Planning: There is a lack of planning to keep lines of communication open and provide the information members need to perform successfully.		Planning: There is an established communication plan designed to foster open communication and provide timely and quality information to members.
Interaction: There is a reluctance to share information and a lack of the skills required to bring clarity and common understanding to discussions.		Interaction: Members effectively share and exchange information with each other, test their understanding, and summarize key points of discussions.
Listening: Members tend to communicate their own views, showing little interest in understanding or clarifying other members' points of view.		Listening: Members actively listen to each other's points of view and convey their understanding, enabling effective two-way communication.
Conflict: Members avoid discussing and addressing potential conflicts that arise.		Conflict: Differing views and opinions are openly shared and discussed to reach mutually satisfying outcomes.
Skills: There is a lack of focus and training on the skills required to maximize the effectiveness of ongoing communication.		Skills: Members regularly demonstrate their effectiveness in listening, verbal, written, presentation, and non-verbal skills.
Information: The information members need to effectively perform their job is not readily available or accessible.		Information: Members consistently receive and have access to the information they need to do their jobs.
Meetings: There is significant time invested in meetings with minimum pay-back due to an inadequate planning and an absence of strong facilitation.		Meetings: Meetings act as an effective means of sharing and processing information, which allows members to actively participate in overall success.
Inclusion: Members are expected to carry out plans and actions that are established without their input or involvement.		Inclusion: Members are actively involved in planning and implementing actions that affect overall success.
Trust: There is little trust and limited cooperation amongst the members.		Trust: There is a high level of trust and cooperation, resulting in win-win outcomes.

Where does your organization or team need to focus?

To pinpoint which factors need work to enhance communication, review your assessment and enter the three highest-rated and lowest-rated factors below.

Which three Contributing Factors did you rate the highest? (closest to seven)	Which three Contributing Factors did you rate the lowest? (closest to one)
1.	
2.	
3.	

Next Steps

- For those contributing factors rated the highest, keep doing what you are doing.
- For those contributing factors rated the lowest, take action to address them.

If you completed the self-assessment on your own and found value in the exercise, consider expanding the self-assessment to include other members of the organization or team. For example:

1. Have the Executive Team complete the self-assessment on the organization.
2. Compile and summarize their ratings on a single, blank assessment sheet.
3. Utilize the assessment summary as the basis for discussion.
4. Delegate responsibility for developing plans and actions to existing teams or standing committees.
5. You may also choose to commission a task force to take charge of the planning process for a specific set of contributing factors.

Expanding involvement provides additional insights, commitment, and support, which contributes to the effectiveness of communication throughout the organization.

If you have multiple teams or departments that you would like to participate in the self-assessment process, contact us at www.businesspaths.net to learn more about our on-line assessment services.

The basics of communication

Why is communication important? It serves as the basis for building relationships and trust...two critical attributes for developing successful teams and organizations.

Whether you communicate with one person or address a team or group, you are sharing, gathering, or processing thoughts and/or information. You use one or more of four communication skills: verbal, written, presentation, and non-verbal. And, based on the situation, your interchange will involve one or more forms of communication, including voice, written/print, or digital. Here are some examples:

One-way communication:

- Voice Feedback, certain meeting topics, presentations, radio promotion
- Written/print Memos, reports, policies, newsletters, promotional materials
- Digital Voice mail, email, blogs, social media, websites, some text messages, tweets

Two-way communication:

- Voice Face-to-face dialogue, phone calls, group discussions, problem solving, negotiation
- Written/print Some surveys
- Digital Information gathering emails, blogs, LinkedIn, Facebook, My Space, some text messages,

In order for one-way communication to be effective, you need to answer an important question that readers have, “What’s in it for me?” Effective two-way communication requires active listening...the single most important communication skill. Sounds pretty simple, doesn’t it? Then, why do people have such difficulty mastering this vital skill?

Barriers to effective two-way communication

Two general barriers get in the way of effective two-way communication, attitude and approach. Here are some examples of each and ways to overcome these barriers:

Attitude

Examples of barriers:

- I know better than you do
- My ideas make the most sense
- We don’t have time for this
- Being a problem identifier vs. problem solver
- Choosing to not communicate
- Win-lose vs. win-win

How to overcome these barriers:

- Actively work to build trust
- Show an interest in others’ needs
- Work toward mutual benefit

Approach

Examples of barriers:

- Failing to actively listen
- Avoiding conflict
- Focus on own position vs. mutual interests
- Assuming what others need vs. asking
- Judging people vs. focusing on the problem
- Hidden agendas
- Emotional outbursts

How to overcome these barriers:

- Listen actively
- Understand your audience
- Work to get your message across

Take Action—Here’s a “power10” for you!

Listen up!

Many people say we have one mouth and two ears for a good reason...to spend more time listening and less time talking. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, fourteen hundred managers who responded to a Ken Blanchard survey believe the following:

- 43 percent feel the most critical skill of a leader is communicating and listening.
- 41 percent feel inappropriate use of communication or listening is the biggest mistake leaders make.

How effective a listener are you? To gain insight, assess how frequently you exhibit the following behaviors:

<u>Behavior</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Often</u>
• I tend to talk more than I listen.				
• I find myself thinking about what I’m going to say next.				
• I get impatient waiting for the other person to finish talking.				
• I interrupt people when they are talking.				
• I respond before the person has finished speaking.				
• I find my mind wandering to other subjects.				

If you have opportunities for improvement, here are a few steps you can take to become a more active listener:

1. Stop what you are doing and look at the person.
2. Concentrate on what they are saying and avoid distractions.
3. Listen carefully to understand the whole message.
4. Ask open-ended questions to gain clarification.
5. Watch for non-verbal signals from the person speaking
6. Test your understanding before you respond
7. Share pertinent input on the topic
8. Summarize any conclusions or agreements that are made

When you follow these steps, you will become a more active listener and therefore a more effective communicator.

Say the words

Effective communication poses many challenges for people. One significant challenge for most people is that they struggle to simply “say the words.” They are reluctant to speak openly and honestly for fear of hurting someone’s feelings, causing conflict, or generating an emotional response. As a result, important exchanges fail to happen.

As a leader, how can you help your people become the best they can be if you are unwilling to communicate openly and honestly? You need to be an “honest broker” in all areas of the business, as well as share where your people need to improve, assist with their growth, and provide feedback on their development.

When your intent is to develop your people to be the best they can be, “saying the words” comes easily.

I remember taking over responsibility for a new organization. And, as I was getting to know the people who worked with and for me on various teams, one woman stood out above the rest. She was unbelievably effective at her job. I found out that she was blessed with a photographic memory, which made a huge difference in her ability to function in her role. She was an invaluable resource for all the members of the organization, as a result of this wonderful gift.

Unfortunately, her communication left much to be desired. The content of her exchanges was always accurate, but her approach was direct, often brash and demeaning. Her exchanges left those on the receiving end feeling stupid and licking their wounds. Her behavior was a barrier to building a successful team. It also left many people from other parts of the organization with the perception that the department was unsupportive of the greater effort. There was no question that this situation had to change.

I made a few informal calls and found that her impact had been felt before. But, in reviewing her employee file, there was no indication that her behavior had been formally addressed during her fourteen years of employment. Rather than dealing with the issue, managers moved her from organization to organization or simply created new jobs to put her in. They failed to “say the words” that would help this woman be the best she could be and develop and grow in her career!

I sat down with her and we talked about the negative impact her behavior was having on those around her. We talked about what she wanted to accomplish in her career. I shared my expectations. And we came to agreement on actions she would take to bring her behavior into line with my expectations. We also settled on “silent signals” I would send her if I observed situations where she was reverting back to her old ways.

Her progress was remarkable. She had totally dedicated herself to changing her ways. I remember one time, as we sat down to discuss how she was doing, tears welled up in her eyes. And, as they began rolling down her face, she thanked me for getting involved. She also told me that I was the first manager in all her years of employment that cared enough to invest the time to help her grow and develop in her career.

When leaders are reminded that developing their people to be the best they can be is one of their primary roles, “saying the words” becomes much easier.

Address conflict as it happens

No matter how much you might hope that if you avoid conflict it will go away, it won't. Don't be fooled. It will simply lie dormant...until the next time...when it erupts!

There are a number of things that generate conflict, ranging from personality conflicts to a lack of communication itself. You might find that misunderstandings or diverse points of view are the culprits. Or different styles that cause mixed signals may be to blame. Regardless of the cause, the more skilled you are at addressing conflict, the more room there will be for open and honest communication. So, let's take a look at steps you can take to address conflict situations as they happen.

Important things to remember as you facilitate conflict resolution:

- Your goal is to hear all sides.
- You need to listen objectively vs. placing blame.
- You need to ask open-ended questions to draw out various points of view.
- Each person's perception is their reality.
- Before a solution can be found, feelings need to be shared, followed by getting the facts on the table.

Here are some steps that will help you effectively address conflict:

1. Bring everyone together.
2. Establish ground rules (i.e., openness and honesty, everyone is heard, listen without reacting, positive attitudes, share facts and specific behaviors to support opinions and feelings).
3. Define the conflict.
4. Hear all sides of the story.
5. Draw out and process emotions.
6. Ask for job-related specifics.
7. Offer feedback, paraphrasing what you have heard.
8. Gain commitment to jointly resolving the issue.
9. Establish goals for the resolution.
10. Establish agreed-upon actions for each issue.
11. Assign responsibility and establish a due date for each action.
12. Meet on a regular basis to review progress until goals are achieved.

When you follow these steps, resolving conflict will become much easier.

Conduct effective meetings

The amount of time spent in meetings is on the rise, and the number and duration of meetings is increasing. With the growing need for having everyone in the boat, actively rowing and collaborating, meetings have become an important and vital part of doing business. As a result, maximizing meeting effectiveness is key to optimizing overall productivity.

Here are some interesting statistics from a variety of sources:

- Managers and knowledge workers estimate that 25 to 80 percent of their time is spent in meetings.
- As much as 67 percent of time spent in meetings is wasted.
- Having no goals or agenda is the second most commonly reported meeting problem.*
- Nearly one half of meetings do not have a written agenda.**
- 73 percent of respondents feel that an agenda is “essential” for a productive meeting.**

*Moswick and Nelson survey of 950 managers and professionals

** Harrison-Hofstra survey

Build a meeting agenda

Many factors affect how productive meetings are...the size of the group, set-up of the room, skills of the facilitator, preparation for the meeting, to mention a few. Sometimes meetings are held simply because there is a standard meeting date and time established. Regardless of all the variables, the one thing that enhances meeting effectiveness is the development and use of an agenda.

The following is an example of a recommended agenda format. There is also a blank agenda at the end of this chapter. Several things about this agenda format enhance meeting effectiveness:

- Stating the purpose of the meeting lets people know why they are coming together.
- Clarifying whether an agenda item involves sharing or requires processing helps participants prepare accordingly.
- Sharing the desired outcome of each item allows everyone to know what needs to be accomplished.
- There is space at the bottom to note any decisions and actions, so copies can be made and distributed at the conclusion of the meeting.

Meeting Agenda - EXAMPLE				
Leadership Team Meeting		Date: Monday, January 5th Location: Conference Room	Start Time: 8:30 a.m. Stop Time: 10:00 a.m.	
Meeting Purpose: Develop a Communication Plan for the organization				
Agenda Item	S/P	Desired Outcome	Facilitator / Presenter	Time Allotted
Communication Plan concept	S	Everyone understands the value of having a Communication Plan.	CEO	10 minutes
Information and communication needs	S/P	Build a list of information and communication that employees need to perform successfully.	CEO / All Team Members	30 minutes
How, when, who will provide information and meet communication needs	P	Finalize a Communication Plan for the organization.	CEO	40 minutes
Wrap up	S	Understand what’s been accomplished; establish next steps.	CEO	10 minutes

S = Sharing Item; P = Processing Item

Decision/Action:	Person Responsible:	By When:
Share the Communication Plan with all teams	All managers	End of the month

Take Action—Call for a “power10”!

Develop and implement a communication plan

The most important skill a manager can possess is communication. The single greatest challenge of the organizations I’ve worked with over the years is communication. Effective communication provides the basis for building relationships and trust. And the list goes on. Yet most people in management positions do not have a communication plan. It’s time to fix that!

The place to start is to determine the what, why, how, when and who of communication. Spell it out in a communication plan, follow it consistently, and reap the rewards!

Begin with understanding people’s needs

What information/communication do your people need? Take a look at how your organization is structured, and decide how you want to tackle a needs analysis.

Take the time to list what information/communication your employees need. Here’s an example:

Organizational Level	Department/Team Level	Individual Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Headquarters/Board direction, insights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Day-to-day operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What’s expected
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational direction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to do the job
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actual performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision authority they have
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General industry information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed upon work processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How they can make a difference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kudos/Recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing feedback and coaching
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is happening in other departments/on other teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance Review
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional development

Now, using what you’ve identified, complete the Communication Plan at the end of this chapter by:

1. Entering each of them on the communication plan.
2. Determining what vehicle will be used to deliver the information/communication.
3. Deciding the frequency of delivery.
4. Assigning responsibility for who will deliver it.

Congratulations! You are on your way to having a comprehensive communication plan. Once it is complete, plot each of the activities on your calendar and/or a shared Calendar of Events. Review the calendar on a regular basis, and plan ahead for sharing the information and effectively communicating with your people. They are counting on you to ensure they get what they need to be successful in their jobs and help the organization achieve its goals!

Volumes have been written on communication. This chapter focuses on the critical few areas that will get you on your way to more effective communication.

Communication	
<p style="text-align: center;">Insights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication is a significant challenge for most organizations. • Most people have not mastered effective communication. • Communication is a leader’s most important skill. • People seldom remember what they are told only once. • Agendas increase meeting effectiveness. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate, communicate, communicate. • People need information to be fully engaged. • Listen more, talk less. • Say the words. • Address conflict as it happens.

For information about available products and services visit www.businesspaths.net

Meeting Agenda

Organization/Department/Team	Date: Location:	Start Time: Stop Time:
-------------------------------------	----------------------------------	---

Meeting Purpose:

Agenda Item	S/P	Desired Outcome	Facilitator / Presenter	Time Allotted
<input type="checkbox"/>				
<input type="checkbox"/>				
<input type="checkbox"/>				
<input type="checkbox"/>				
<input type="checkbox"/>				
<input type="checkbox"/>				

S = Sharing Item; P = Processing Item

Decision/Action:	Person Responsible:	By When:

Communication Plan

Organizational Level

<i>What information?</i>	<i>How it will be delivered</i>	<i>Frequency of delivery</i>	<i>Who will deliver it?</i>

Department/Team Level

<i>What information?</i>	<i>How it will be delivered</i>	<i>Frequency of delivery</i>	<i>Who will deliver it?</i>

Individual Level

<i>What information?</i>	<i>How it will be delivered</i>	<i>Frequency of delivery</i>	<i>Who will deliver it?</i>

Communication Plan - EXAMPLE

Organizational Level

<i>What information?</i>	<i>How it will be delivered</i>	<i>Frequency of delivery</i>	<i>Who will deliver it?</i>
Headquarters/Board direction & insights	Organizational meeting Email President’s report to staff	Quarterly Monthly	CEO Executive Assistant
Organizational direction	Organizational meeting	Quarterly	CEO
Ongoing performance	Organizational meeting	Quarterly	CEO
General industry information			
Policies and procedures			

Department/Team Level

<i>What information?</i>	<i>How it will be delivered</i>	<i>Frequency of delivery</i>	<i>Who will deliver it?</i>
Day-to-day operations	Team meetings	Weekly	Manager
Performance expectations	Team meeting	First of year	Manager
Actual performance	Team meetings	Weekly/Monthly	Manager
Agreed upon work processes	Work group meetings	First of year; New personnel added	Work group leader
Kudos/Recognition	Team meetings	Monthly	Manager
What’s new in other departments/on other teams?	Team meetings Newsletter	Weekly Monthly	Manager Publisher

Individual Level

<i>What information?</i>	<i>How it will be delivered</i>	<i>Frequency of delivery</i>	<i>Who will deliver it?</i>
What’s expected?	One-on-one	Beginning of year	Manager
How to do the job	Training	As required	Trainers
Decision authority individual has	One-on-one	Reviewed at beginning of year; updated as changes	Manager
How they can make a difference?	One-on-one	Monthly	Manager
Ongoing feedback and coaching	One-on-one	Monthly	Manager
Performance Review	One-on-one	Month after year-end	Manager
Professional development	Annual career guidance Review and Plan	Anniversary month Quarterly	Manager Manager