

Just about everyone agrees that manager communication is important. Yet it remains a problem at many organizations, a problem that is often delegated to the communication function. In this article, Andy Szpekman provides a simple three-step process that will make managers better communicators. The result? More motivated and productive employees with a better understanding of what's expected from them.

Three steps to improving manager communication

Harnessing the organization's most popular information source

By Andy Szpekman

The debate about whether managers are employees' preferred sources of information has been raging among communicators for some time. You have probably seen studies that suggest employees prefer to learn anything and everything from their managers. Other studies conclude it depends on the topic being discussed.

Both sets of studies miss the larger point. Managers are popular sources of information because employees often have little interest in what's communicated through other sources. Much of what they read on the intranet, see on closed circuit television or hear from senior executives might be mildly enlightening, but it has little impact on employees' day-to-day lives.

Managers, on the other hand, can relay information that applies directly to people's jobs and careers. They can provide performance feedback and recognition, discuss opportunities for professional development and career

advancement and hold salary reviews. Other sources of information, no matter how well crafted or well intentioned, are hard-pressed to provide news as compelling.

If improving the management skills of your organization's leaders is a business priority, here's a simple three-step process you can use to help make them better communicators. One tip before we get started: don't expect to go it alone. You'll need support from HR and senior management to be successful.

Step 1. Define manager communication accountabilities

The first step in improving manager communication is to ensure managers know what's expected of them. When I was in charge of HR communication at Bank of America, I led a project designed to help managers become better communicators. The project began with a quick survey that asked associates (the company's term for employees) to rate their managers on several performance dimensions.

The survey results suggested most managers were providing clear and open communication about associate and business unit objectives. They also were reviewing their team's performance outcomes. Far fewer, however, were routinely discussing associates' development opportunities

and career goals. In other words, managers were generally helping people do their current jobs, but not preparing them for future assignments.

We didn't need to ask managers why this was the case. The reason seemed obvious. Managers were measured on and rewarded for their team's performance, not for helping people grow professionally and advance in their careers. So, they channeled their efforts accordingly.

The main point here is that when employees think of "good manager communication," they are generally envisioning a manager who engages in frequent, two-way dialogue about topics the employee finds personally meaningful. They are picturing a manager who, besides giving performance feedback, involves employees in important decisions, recognizes contributions, discusses career and professional development, and is receptive to ideas and suggestions. Employees are not thinking of a manager who provides frequent briefings on companywide programs, updates on other departments' activities and messages from the chairman.

In the years since Bank of America conducted its survey, the company made a number of changes to ensure managers meet the full range of employee communication needs. Below are the actions all managers are now expected to take:

- Communicating clear and specific performance expectations and measures of success.
- Providing candid performance feedback.
- Conducting formal reviews at least once a year

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to appraise performance, plan career and professional development, and discuss compensation.

- Encouraging associates to speak openly and candidly about issues.
- Explaining business unit goals and results, and how associate contributions made a difference.
- Encouraging and rewarding associates who do the right thing for customers, clients and shareholders.

These accountabilities are not rocket science. They are just simple and effective communication practices that address issues people care about. Has your company defined a similar list of manager accountabilities? If it has not, I urge you to do so as a first step in improving manager communication.

Step 2. Motivate managers to communicate

Most managers are bombarded with requests for their time and attention. Staff employees and outside consultants continually develop and promote new programs and initiatives that depend on manager involvement. In deciding where to focus their energies, managers take their

Figure One: The communication process



◀ cues from what is occurring around them, beginning with what senior leaders say and do. The questions leaders ask, the issues they discuss, the resources they assign to initiatives, the decisions they make – all loudly communicate what’s important, and what’s not. Simple rubberstamp endorsement from leaders, like inserting a cover note from the chairman into a communication package, fools no one.

HR processes also play a powerful role in communicating importance. For example, the issues probed on a job interview signal to candidates what will really be expected of the position holder – despite what the job description might say. Performance management and 360-degree feedback processes suggest the type of behaviors the company is trying to foster. Training programs and job aids further emphasize what matters to the company.

Finally, managers’ own performance measures and incentives forcefully communicate what’s important. If a requested activity or suggested behavior doesn’t square with what the manager is paid to do, it’s unreasonable to expect the manager to do it. Or in the words of American author Upton Sinclair: “It’s difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”

If you want managers to communicate with employees, you need to consider the items you see on Figure One (previous page). For example,

- Do senior leaders serve as communication role models?
- Do manager hiring, coaching and development processes emphasize communication skills?
- Do incentive and recognition programs reward manager communication?

Formal messages encouraging managers to communicate – the kind found in Web sites,

articles, presentations, and so forth – can help generate awareness and understanding. But by themselves, they are unlikely to change someone’s behavior.

Step 3. Provide training and tools

Once managers know what they are expected to communicate and are motivated to do it, they will view communication training and tools as resources that can help them meet their business objectives. A common mistake is to introduce these resources before taking actions to make them meaningful.

When planning communication training, the first step is to outline the competencies managers need to be effective communicators. From my experience, managers need competencies in four areas, shown in Figure Two below.

Business acumen and feedback and coaching collectively address “what” managers need to communicate. Listening and speaking address “how” managers need to communicate. Based on how you define managers’ communication accountabilities, your list of competencies might be different. The competencies listed in Figure Two, however, should prove a good starting point.

For the actual training session, here’s the agenda I would follow. Start off by explaining the benefits of improved employee communication from the manager’s perspective – i.e., more motivated and productive employees. Next, describe the type of communication employees want from their managers. We covered this in the first part of the article. Use the balance of the session to review the competencies managers need, and then let managers practice demonstrating these competencies.

Here are a few best practices to follow:

- Keep the sessions brief. Two hours is usually long enough.

Figure Two: Developing management competencies

Manager competency	Behavioral examples
Business Accumen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect company strategies to the marketplace • Align work unit goals to company strategies • Define individual performance objectives and metrics
Feedback and Coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spot opportunities to enhance employee performance • Link contribution to rewards • Develop employees for future assignments
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn assertions into questions to start a dialogue • Understand someone’s position before reacting • Probe to determine the root cause of problems
Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak clearly and directly • Match words to tone and body language • Be sensitive to nuance and timing

- Begin or end the session with a senior leader emphasizing the importance of manager communication.
- Use role-plays to give managers the chance to practice what they learned and critique each other in small groups. Rotate managers through the roles of manager, employee and observer.
- Provide reference materials and resources managers can use after the training to continue building their skills.
- Be realistic. Don't expect to transform anyone after a one-time event. Set practical goals and craft a plan to build on your progress.

Part of your ongoing campaign to help managers communicate more effectively might involve developing a standardized communication tool.

One such tool that Bank of America uses is the "change communication huddle," designed to help managers quickly review a work-related change with their teams. Before developing the huddle, the company audited its communication practices and learned that many managers were not using the newsletters, "meetings in a box" and other communication tools they had been receiving. These managers had few opportunities to meet with their teams as a group, and they found the tools impractical and cumbersome.

Moreover, when asked about actual content, managers and associates explained that they didn't need all the context-setting information they were getting. They said, in essence, "Context equals clutter. Just tell us the facts in the fewest

words possible." Associates also wanted more opportunities to discuss important issues with their managers, instead of just one-way communication. So, with this mandate and a group of line managers on the project team, Bank of America developed the tool shown in Figure Three, below.

The huddle template is used in two ways. Sometimes, it's filled out and given to managers. Other times, managers complete the blank template themselves to prepare for a team meeting about an important change. As you can see, the huddle is meant to be brief, as it generally occurs before or after a shift. The meeting structure, however, is adaptable, and an actual huddle can be shorter or longer depending on the topic.

Management's big advantage

When you add up employees' communication needs and managers' accountabilities, it may seem like a tall order to get managers to communicate effectively. But managers possess a big advantage: they know their teams well. They know their team's interests and subject-matter knowledge. They know how their team will to respond to an issue. They understand the work environment, and they are generally seen as trustworthy. In short, managers have the insights necessary to tailor information to their audience's needs – something few communicators are as qualified to do. [scm](#)

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Figure Three: The change communication huddle

Step	Minutes	Information to cover
Open huddle Tell associate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's going to change • Why it's important to the associate and the company • What you want them to do differently 	3 minutes	
Clarify topic and challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure associates understand what's being asked of them • Solicit issues, challenges or concerns about making this change 	4 minutes	
Develop solutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit ideas to address any issues, challenges or concerns associates have • Solicit ideas for measuring success with this action 	3 minutes	
Agree on actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm and get commitment on what needs to happen next 	1 minute	
Close the huddle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See if there are any questions • Express confidence • Wrap up discussion 	1 minute	