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EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION FOR EFFECTIVE SUPERVISORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes to the practice of good management at the first-line level. Too often such jobs have been given to those who are technically or professionally competent but who lack interest in people or skills in dealing with them. Are leaders born or made? There is no doubt that – given a certain basic potential – leadership can be developed. Communication is inseparable from leadership. The paper looks at the relevant systems of communication, especially team briefing. This is a system that ensures that each supervisor will get his team together on a regular basis to brief them on progress and policy as well as matters which affect their welfare or development as employees. As the effective supervisor has a stake in good organizational communication, the paper briefly surveys other methods or forms of communication which ought to be of use in an organization.

KEYWORDS

Face-to-face Communication, Mass Methods, Effective communication, Team- Briefing, Walking the job.

INTRODUCTION

A supervisor is a member of the first line of management responsible for a work group to a higher level of management. Their task is to get things done through the correct management of the people for whom they are responsible. Supervisors and Foremen are by definition leaders, set apart from and above other employees. It is a strange position in which in your own time you socialize with your colleagues and share their interests and problems, but in company time you are expected to become their 'judge' and 'arbiter.' As soon as you put on the white coat of office you are letting yourself in for a fairly tough ride. As a leader, you will find that much of your time is spent facing the music – dealing with complaints, suggestions, grievances and other enquires. That is exactly why you are there: your employees have a right to complain and enquire, and it is your job to explain and justify to them any decisions which you might make. Should the still continue to carp and criticize, it is probably not you personally or your job that they are unhappy about: it is almost certainly the way in which you are managing your team.

The Success of Supervisors depends, primarily, on their ability to communicate to all the people for whom they are responsible first what they need to do and second the importance of doing it. If you are to be a successful supervisor, you must also encourage communication in the opposite direction, so that you can harness the ideas, views and experiences of the people who are actually carrying out the job.

WHY DOES COMMUNICATION MATTER?

Communication matters for a plethora of reasons:

1. Communication failures are costly. For example, in one large organization it was discovered that, out of thirty-five stoppages, no fewer than eighteen were due to failures in communication. The cost of these stoppages could not be measured merely in terms of the hours lost: they upset the whole rhythm of production, lessened cooperation between employees and their supervisors, and created ill- feeling, which always reduces productivity.
2. During times of change within an organization, the full benefits of the change can be achieved only where there is an adequate communication system for explaining directly, preferable face-to-face, to the employees what is required of them and why.
3. Adequate communication results in greater productivity, because employees direct their work more effectively and cooperate more with their leaders. One city organization has actually monitored staff productivity and found that there is a significant upsurge after each monthly briefing by management or supervisors.
4. You may find that people of good potential are leaving your organization simply because they are unaware of their prospects. Finding and training someone from outside the organization is a costly matter, and it lowers morale among colleagues. In order to avoid such situations, you need to communicate to you subordinates what you think of them and what their futures within the organization are likely to be.
5. People will give of their best to their work only if they fully understand the decisions that affect them and the reasons behind those decisions. Your subordinates need to understand what they have to do and why, how they are performing against the budgets and the targets they have been set, and what their conditions of employment are. Given this understanding, they can become involved in what they are doing, so that you enjoy greater efficiency, higher morale, and improved cooperation.
6. Would you be happy working if you did not know why you were doing your work? No, obviously not. So clearly you owe it to your staff to make sure that they are not in that situation.

WHAT SHOULD I COMMUNICATE?

The first thing to decide is: what are your priorities? The system of communication you use will depend on your answer to this question. Clearly you cannot tell everybody everything, or consult everybody about everything, because if you did you'd never get any work done. The old idea was that you told your subordinates what you thought would interest them, skipping all the boring stuff. But this is not really good enough. If you operate this principle, you find that you are not only missing out many things which it is important that your subordinates understand, you are also telling them a lot of things which, while perhaps interesting, are of little relevance. Of course, it is more difficult to get across things to employees who they find essentially uninteresting, but nevertheless you should persevere, and make sure the points are fully understood.

This matter of understanding is important. It is the vital first step in ensuring that any consultations you have with your employees are successful. Too often, supervisors seek ideas and opinions in formal consultation structures without having first given their subordinates sufficient understanding of their work for realistic ideas and opinions to be generated. Moreover, people will go along with a decision with which they profoundly disagree just so long as they understand why it has been taken. If they do not, you are very likely to find yourself with a revolt on your hands.

The primary things that need to be communicated to people come under two headings: things that affect their job, and things that affect their employment. Under the first heading come all the things that will enable them to do their job better; under the second come all the things concerning their rewards for having done the job. It is vital – as much for the good of the organization as for the good of the individual employee – that such matters be communicated effectively. And doing so is an important part of your job.

WHICH METHOD DO I CHOOSE?

The worst communication method you can use is the grapevine. To be true, the grapevine can be useful, but you use it at your peril. Facts can be communicated accurately through the grapevine – and very swiftly: sometimes, for example, the news about a forthcoming appointment can be communicated before the formal decision has been made! The great disadvantage is that the grapevine always gives an uncharitable reason for any decision, and that is bad for employee cooperation. The grapevine will say that someone has been promoted because she is about to marry the boss's son, not because she is good at her job; and all

the people who are not being promoted will feel (quite naturally) resentful. So you own it to yourself, your organizations and your staff to make sure that there is some systematic way whereby they can learn about the things that matter. There are three main ways in which you can communicate effectively:

1. Through face-to-face communication
2. Through discussing matters with staff representatives
3. Through 'mass methods', such as a house journal or the notice boards – although the former will probably be outside your control

You have to decide which method to use, and to be clear about what can be communicated through each of them and what the limitations of each of them are. All too often, communication breakdowns occur because managers and supervisors are using the wrong methods or because they are trying to communicate the wrong type of information through a particular system.

Face-to-face communication between supervisors and their subordinates is good in many ways. Part of the job of being a leader is to be the person to whom people look for explanations about the things that matter to them, and so, by becoming the direct communicator, you become a more effective leader. Moreover, you are in fact the best person to act as communicator, because you know – or should know – exactly why something is being done, and your subordinates will benefit from getting the news straight from the horse's mouth. You can tailor your explanation according to the interests of the particular group you are addressing, and then you can answer any questions that are forthcoming – something that is vital if your employees are to understand what is going on. Finally, face-to-face communication can save a lot of management time, ensures common understanding, and is the most powerful method of 'selling' ideas and building group commitment.

All of which might make you wonder why we bother even considering the other techniques of communication. However, the face-to-face approach has some weakness. For example, it can be very expensive in terms of the supervisor's time and, if there are more than two levels to communication between senior management and the front line, can be a total fiasco unless properly organized – which means that you or the management have to spend time and effort doing the organizing. Another consequence of there being several levels of communication is that the hierarchy of leadership cannot by itself adequately cope with upward communication: senior management is often quite unaware of the vividness of attitudes at the bottom, because what has been reported to them has been diluted by passing through the various levels. Of course, you might think you are in an ideal position to prevent this happening, but however hard you try it is almost certain that, somewhere along the line the attitudes of the workforce will be understated.

Communication through representatives has many advantages, because you can explain a policy directly to a few of the employees concerned, and discuss it with them; clearly this is more economical of your time and effort than setting up a system whereby policy is explained directly to every single employee. Also, representatives will tell you in forthright fashion exactly what the feelings are on the shop floor or in the typing pool; and the formal contracts made through meetings with representatives lead to more informal contacts, something which cannot help but be good for efficiency. However, although the representatives will usually understand you message completely, they will very often fail to pass it on accurately to those they represent – particularly in the case of unpleasant decisions. This is because the representatives are being put in the invidious position of being management mouthpieces: this is not their job, and if you force them to do it you are making both yourself and them look shoddy.

What, then, of mass methods? Notice-boards, house journals and so on offer the cheapest ways of giving information to large numbers of people, and they allow it to be done quickly. But, like the other techniques of communication, they have their problems. For example, while one of the strengths of a notice on the board is that you can ensure that the information you are transmitting is absolutely accurate, you have no way of knowing that it is being received accurately. Your employees cannot ask a notice-board a question, and so they may completely misunderstand what you are trying to communicate (a factor exacerbated by the grapevine). Likewise, although in theory people can ask questions at mass meetings, in practice most people are too shy to do so at any meeting where there are more than twenty present. Another important point is that mass means of communication can, by their very nature, cover only general aspects: what people really want to know is how they or their immediate working group are likely to be affected.

This matter of allowing for questions should be stressed. It is the only way in which you can ensure that everybody understands what is going on. There is a colossal difference between providing accurate information and getting people truly to understand that information. Experience has shown that, whatever other communication system you use, face-to-face encounters are vital, so that people can ask questions. Interestingly, explanation to a small group is better (as well as less time-consuming!) than to individuals: in a group, people benefit from hearing the answers to other people's questions and, of course, timid people profit through the fact that other people will ask the questions that they are too shy to ask.

Whatever technique of communication you choose for a specific situation bear in mind that any systematic method is better than none at all. Obviously, the mass methods are easiest to use, and the face-to-face ones the most difficult. But, especially in a large organization, communication both upward and downward will be unsuccessful unless you make judicious use of each of these three of technique.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION THROUGH MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS

The busier the working life, the more important it is that you have mastered a systematic communication drill. You cannot afford to hope that communication will simply 'happen' in some kind of casual fashion. For example, you might explain some change with brilliant lucidity to your immediate subordinates but then, by the time the information has passed down to the other members of your team, find that the message has become utterly garbled. Even if it has not, what almost certainly has happened is that the people in the front line have concluded that the change will come about solely because 'they' have decided that it will or that it was all a 'management decision'. You could hardly concoct a better way of ensuring that your subordinates are disgruntled.

Of course, because 'they' have ordained it, your team will almost certainly do what is required...but they will not actively cooperate. And the difference between sullen obedience and constructive cooperation is very often the difference between loss and profit. If all you can get is obedience, then you are not doing your job properly.

If downward communication is to be effective then it has to be systematic. The object is to ensure that all employees have the decisions that affect their jobs or their conditions of employment fully spelled out to them, face-to-face, by their immediate boss. Two things are important if this is to come about: there must be a team-briefing drill that ensures communication, via supervisors, right down the line to the work group; and all the necessary information must be known to subordinate managers and supervisors.

MASS METHODS

Of all the mass methods of communication, the most noteworthy for the supervisor are the following: the notice-board, house journals, managers' newsletters, employee handbooks, loudspeaker systems and mass meetings. Although some of these may be beyond your jurisdiction, let us look at each of them in turn.

First: notice-boards. The siting of these is important: not only should they be where people will see them, they should also be positioned such that people can actually stop to look at them. At each site there should either be two notice-boards or one notice-board overtly divided into two parts: one sections can be used for new and/or urgent notices and the other for less urgent (but nevertheless important) matters. Once a notice has been in the 'urgent' sections for forty-eight hours it should either be moved over, if it is important, or thrown away, if it is not. All notices on the board should be signed by an individual – otherwise the employees are likely to feel that they are part of nothing more than an impersonal web – and a particular individual (preferably the departmental supervisor) should be put in charge of each notice-board. A final point to note is that, when you are composing a notice for the board, you should think about how you would express the information were you actually speaking to the people, face-to-face. Write down what you would say rather than mess around with literary elegance. People respond far more readily if, as they read the message, they can 'hear your voice.'

The main purposes of house journals should be to provide a mass means of explaining the organization's activities and policies to the employees, to help the employees feel that they are involved in the organization, and to create an atmosphere in which change is accepted. The people responsible for budgeting and planning a house journal should be thinking in terms of frequency and flexibility. A journal may not look like much, but it is far more topical than a glossy magazine that is always a couple of months out-of-date because of printing schedules. The contents of a house journal should be regarded as being in three thirds: one third should be devoted to product and other news that affects employees' jobs; one third to developments or changes in conditions of employment;

and one third to social events and ephemera. Of course, news that might affect jobs should already have been communicated, via managers and supervisors, to those directly concerned; but repetition here is useful to inform those who less directly concerned. The ephemera should not be regarded as an optional extra. One publishing company discovered that very few employees ever read its weekly newsletter until it began to contain jokey reports of the antics of the company cricket team: suddenly everybody; whether interested in cricket or not, turned to the column hoping for a good joke, and ended up reading the rest of the newsletter. As a supervisor, you are well placed to contribute "fun" ephemera like this – better placed, in fact, than anyone in senior management.

Also, we can note here the manager's or supervisor's newsletter. This can be regarded as a company newsletter that applies to, and is distributed to, the employees of only a single part of the organization; it is, of course, prepared by the relevant manager or supervisor. Such newsletters should appear at least monthly and preferable more frequently than that: whenever there is something important to be communicated, an issue of the newsletter should appear – especially if there is any possibility that employees might misunderstand what is going on. And do not try to economize by running off too few copies: unless every employee has his or her own copy, the whole exercise is a waste of your time.

Each of your subordinates should have an employee handbook setting out the main rules and arrangements that apply to them. The handbook should be as brief as possible. If need be, it can be supplemented by booklets dealing with specific subjects – e.g., disputes procedures. The best ways of presenting the information in employee handbooks is usually in question and answer form, explaining specific aspects of conditions of employment. For example, it may be obligatory to provide employees with the rules of the pension fund in their full legal rigor; however, the resulting document will be comprehensible only to a fully fledged lawyer, and so it makes a lot of sense to give employees a question-and-answer version, written without jargon, which they can actually understand.

Loudspeaker systems tend to be used too frequently. They are unsatisfactory for putting over a policy, as the listener often cannot even see the person speaking – let alone ask a question. So, unless you feel you really need it, drop the loudspeaker in bucket of water at the earliest possible opportunity. Likewise, while mass meetings have a certain value, they are a poor means of ensuring that employees gain any understanding of what is going on because questions are impossible. Team briefing, working down the line, is a much more effective alternative.

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

So far we have talked only about communication within the organization. However, you may very well have to communicate regularly with people outside the organization, and in no field can this be a thornier problem than of customer complaints. Ideally, such complaints should be fielded by senior managers. The most difficult situation in the field of customer relations is when something has gone wrong – the product has failed, promises have not been kept, deadlines have not been met... Whatever the reason, the customer is quite rightly displeased, and it is up to you to deal with their displeasure.

It is quite understandable to want to go on the defensive – but it is also a big mistake. There is no surer way of losing a customer forever than to respond with something like: 'Well, no one's ever complained before.' You are implying that the customer is a pest and a fool, and, curious as it may seem, customers are not generally thrilled by this. Oddly enough, it is actually more efficient to encourage customer complaints. They are a marvelous tool, providing more useful information about our products, services or performances than any number of surveys or praise-packed letters. If you use them correctly, complaints can work for you. Some researchers have shown that companies which encourage complaints – for example, by having an accessible and publicized customer-relations or complaints department – can increase customer-retention by as much as 10 per cent. If you go one stage further, and are seen actually to do something about the complaints you receive – following them up and reporting back to the customer – your rate of customer-retention increases by a staggering 70 per cent, but if you pursue the complaints and come to a happy compromise.

By contrast, discouraging or rejecting complaints is bad policy. The same researches showed that, when customers found that their complaints were discouraged or that nothing was done about them, they told between 9 and 13 other people about the bad experience they had had; it is, after all, a natural human activity to gossip about the appalling treatment we have had at the hands of one company or another. This means that, by failing to communicate with customers who have complaints, you are not only losing those customers forever, you are ensuring that many potential clients would not touch your company or its products with a bargepole. But there is more to it than that. Not only do dissatisfied customers tell the world about your organization's shortcomings, they fail to tell you the reasons for their dissatisfaction. Unless you know why they are unhappy, you will never find out why it is that your organization is losing customers – those customers who for one reason or another do not make a formal complaint, but simply cease trading with you.

It is therefore a vital aspect of communication to make sure that you listen to complaints and that you work to make sure that something is done about them. Of course, you may well be unlucky enough to be in an organization in which the managers above you block all your best efforts to keep the customers satisfied. In this case, it is your duty to appeal as high up the management ladder as you can go. If you are still thwarted, you might consider looking for another job: organizations whose senior managers have no interest in customer satisfaction are unlikely to thrive.

IS COMMUNICATION WORKING?

In these participative days, a key factor in effective leadership is the extent to which you pay serious attention to communication, both upward and downward. The more trouble you take over communication, the better your people will work for you and the better you will be able to work for those above you – not to mention the fact that all concerned will enjoy their jobs more. If you take action to improve communication, you will find that efficiency increases, 'as if by magic.' Except that there is no magic involved: all you have done is allowing your subordinates and your superiors to get more out of their jobs – and hence more out of life. As with all other aspects of leadership, it is necessary to check that your communication is actually working.

'Walking the job' is an effective technique. Every now and then, simply walk around the place, chatting with the employees about their work, the weather, or anything else, and above all listening to what they have to say. You may be surprised by what you hear. If someone does not know why they are doing a particular job, or why a change has been made, then that means your communication system has broken down, somewhere along the line. For the short term, you should investigate the individual matter concerned, obviously; but for the longer term you should take a pretty close look at your own and your organization's systems of communication.

Another, more formal, means of checking things out is through the use of questionnaires. There are two main types. In one, employees are simply asked how they heard about certain changes or decisions; their responses tell you how much you are communicating yourself and how much is being bruited about via the grapevine. The other useful type of questionnaire is the 'attitude survey', in which employees are asked – with guaranteed anonymity! – what they know about various organizational policies, what their attitudes are to the organization and their bosses, what they think about their employment conditions, and so on. If you feel that such a survey would be of value, you might find it worth suggesting to your company's management that they employ an outside organization to carry it out, as your subordinates may be reluctant to say what they really think if they feel there is a chance their remarks might be traced back to them. Both types of survey can supply you with invaluable information about communication failures, but be warned: you may not like a lot of what you discover.

Of course, there are many aspects of communication both within and outside your company over which you have no control – for example, you do not have the power to instigate a glossy monthly house journal – but nevertheless you should do everything you can to make sure that you are communicating management decisions effectively to your subordinates and that you are communicating upwards to management accurately, fully and forcefully. If you subordinates are unhappy about something and there is nothing you, yourself, can do about it, do not just shrug your shoulders and say: 'Well that's the way it is.' Communicate the dissatisfaction up the ladder so that either (a) the problem is solved or (b) at least you get an explanation, so that you in turn can tell your subordinates exactly why the circumstance to which they object cannot be changed. Likewise, if one of your subordinates comes up with a good idea, make sure it is passed on upwards and that the person concerned is properly credited.

CONCLUSION

Of all managers, the supervisor is closest to the people who actually do the work – more often than not – closest to the customer. Therefore the development of effective supervision is a matter of paramount importance. A company that is aiming for excellence can do better by investing time and money in training its

supervisors. In various aspects of effective supervision, however, it cannot be stressed too strongly that, unless you make sure that you are communicating effectively, all of your other efforts are wasted. You may not enjoy communicating – you may be timid or you may simply dislike most of the people with whom you work – but nevertheless you must force yourself into the task and force yourself at least to look as if you are enjoying it – which usually means, after a while, that you find to your surprise that you actually are. If you are a good communicator you improve the position of your own section of the organization – in other words, of the organization as a whole. You are therefore extremely likely to find yourself being promoted up the management ladder. It will then become your duty to pass your communication skills on to the supervisor working beneath you, as well as to deal with intra organizational communications on a much broader scale. Make sure, then, that you develop your communication skills now.

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