Why Better Business Communication Matters and How to Improve It

Career Development

When asked in job interviews, “Are you a good communicator?” your gut reaction is, “Of course!” But, the truth is, we could all fine-tune our communication skills, whether you’re new to in-house or a chief legal officer. This month’s column will explain, using surprising statistics, why good business communication is important and how to improve your and your company’s communication.

By the numbers

While there are many causes of poor workplace communication, the lack of time spent on it doesn't seem to be the problem. According to Polly, "time spent on calls, emails and meetings has increased by 25 percent to 50 percent in the last two decades." However, good communication is more than transmitting messages; they must be delivered impactfully.

Every day, 205.6 billion emails are sent around the globe, but only one third of emails are actually opened. Additionally, although companies host an average of 61 meetings per month, 39 percent of people sleep through them, and 73 percent do other work during these meetings.

The same Polly article shows these unnecessary emails and long meetings can take a toll on a company, particularly with employee engagement:

> *"Employees who feel respected by their employers and are engaged at work are 87 percent less likely to leave their organization and seek new employment. Yet only 38 percent of employees say their company treats them with respect."*

Poor communication can lead to employees becoming frustrated that their time isn't valued. But, when employees are purposefully engaged, it yields tangible results, according to bluesource: "Productivity improves by up to 25 percent in organizations with connected employees."

More than employee turnover, company finances are also drained by poor communication. According to a Holmes report, the global PR leader found:

> *"[US$37 billion is the] total estimated cost of employee misunderstanding (including actions or errors of omission by employees who have misunderstood or were misinformed about company policies, business processes, job function or a combination of the three) in … corporations in the United States and United Kingdom."*

Some of these statistics may be a bit alarming, so how do we solve this wasteful problem? Below are recommendations on how to improve your and your organization's communication skills.

Be transparent

To show that companies care about their employees, they must be transparent. I'm sure we've all worked in a company where everything felt like a secret that only management knew. That type of culture breeds discontent.

Of course, management cannot divulge everything happening in a company, but they should strive to be as open as possible. That way, employees feel like they belong and are part of the organization's overall plan.

As in-house counsel, we have a duty to ensure confidentiality. However, that doesn't mean that we can't support senior management's efforts to be transparent if it won't harm the company.

We can also be transparent in our day-to-day work. For example, I've collaborated with fantastic contracts managers and analysts. Over time, I learned that I could trust them and, thus, I was candid with them about unneeded redlines in a negotiation.

That transparency signaled to the contracts analysts that I trusted them, which expedited the negotiation process and ultimately strengthened my company's relationships with our clients and vendors.

Listen actively

Active listening is an overlooked communication tool. During a busy work cycle, it is easy to multitask while someone is talking to you. However, if we are not truly listening to someone to understand their message, we do them, our company, and ourselves a disservice.

For example, if you're reviewing a contract and someone stops by your office with a question, you have many choices. Let's take three of those options:

1. You can half listen to the person while half keeping an eye on your phone and computer and continuing to review the contract.

2. You can stop everything you're doing, turn to the person, and have a productive conversation with them.
3. If you are in the middle of something that needs to get done, you can arrange to meet with the person at another time when you can give your full attention.

If you pick the second or third option, you'll learn more from the person speaking to you and, likely, can better address what they're discussing with you. If you pick the first option, you may be forced to have the same conversation again because you missed key elements of it the first time or you may have to redo work if you misunderstand the ask and start to work on it.

A wonderful active listening tool is to check for understanding. For example, let's say you explain a complex concept to a colleague. It may help to ask, "Does that make sense?" This way, your colleague has a chance to say, "No," and tell you where there is a misunderstanding. Likewise, if a colleague is explaining something to you, repeat the basics of it back to them. This ensures that you're not misunderstanding their message.

Because our attention often meanders and because we are often only hearing our colleagues, not truly listening, we spend a lot of time clearing up miscommunications, backtracking, and fixing mistakes.

Imagine an organization with people who all employ active listening. You wouldn't have to repeat yourself as much as you do now. There would be fewer misunderstandings. Meetings and phone calls would be more productive. Employee morale would be higher.

Communicate effectively at all levels

The need for better communication is not limited to young or entry level employees. No matter your title, you can improve business communication. In fact, "senior leadership" ranked second on Kincentric: A Spencer Stuart Company (formerly, Aon)'s list of top engagement opportunities. The

aforementioned Holmes Report also confirmed this:

> *"Companies that have leaders who are highly effective communicators had 47 percent higher total returns to shareholders over the last five years compared with firms that have leaders who are the least effective communicators."*

To facilitate conversations between employee leaders and their team, consider using digital communication channels in the workplace, such as Slack, Jabber, or Microsoft Teams.

As in-house counsel, if you have the clout to influence change, encouraging senior management to be effective communicators would serve your organization well. If you don't have that social capital, improve your communication style and hope others take your lead.

Use a variety of communication methods

Using different communication styles can help spread a message faster. I spoke with a director of corporate communications recently who described her tactic when communicating a change in a company practice. The organization was telling employees to dial six instead of nine when calling an external phone number.

Her department's strategy included posting table tents and signs throughout the building, emailing the update, and distributing business card size reminders. This is brilliant. Employees are busy. As the statistics show, they aren't even reading all of their emails or paying attention in meetings.

Sharing a message through various avenues will increase the odds that the staff sees the message. Employees are bound to see physical reminders, and if they don't, their colleagues may tell them. Thus, word-of-mouth may help spread your message even further.

Know your audience and message

When communicating with someone you work with regularly, know your audience. Meaning, if you know someone reads his email religiously, email him. If you know another colleague communicates best via the phone, call her.

Always share information in compliance with your company's privacy and data security policies and encourage others to do the same. If the information is sensitive or confidential, be mindful and share it (or don't) accordingly. Everyone in a company should be careful about sensitive information and we, as in-house counsel, have a unique opportunity to be leaders in responsible guarding of sensitive data.

Value inter-generational communication

Working with people of all ages benefits the company, as it adds diverse thought to the office. However, different generations (or different people, regardless of age) may view communication differently. The following statistics from the previously mentioned bluesource article paint a picture of the challenges workplaces face with different communication preferences:

- Around a quarter of employees think email is a major productivity killer.

- 78 percent of people who text wish they could have a text conversation with a business.
- 81 percent of millennials think “state of the art technology” is paramount to an ideal working environment over perks or amenities.
- 44 percent of employees want wider adoption of internal communication tools.
- 49 percent of millennials support social tools for workplace collaboration.
- 74 percent of all online adults prefer email as their main method of commercial communication.

If you aren’t in a leadership role, it may be hard to effect a companywide change. However, on an individual level, you can know your audience and communicate accordingly.

As part of the legal team, you can also help draft communication policies. For example, a bring your own device (BYOD) policy covers and can solve some communication concerns. You can also offer risk management advice to senior management.

Overall, with different communication options in the workplace, be respectful of each other’s preferences, and clearly explain why you prefer a certain method of communication.

Keep up with technology and 2020 work styles

With ever-evolving technology, sometimes it seems hard for our communication methods to keep up. For example, a Gallup study shows that 43 percent of US employees work remotely some of the time.

For remote employee programs to be effective, it’s important that the organization creates a policy that supports the remote worker, and that the remote worker remains connected through phone calls, video conferencing, and emails. When handled effectively, remote workers can be just as connected as onsite workers.

As in-house counsel, we should be wary of telecommuting employees complying with company data policies. To avoid this problem, partner with senior management and IT to ensure that you’re addressing where and how data is stored and shared.

Another issue is the employee’s ability to “unplug.” This constant connectedness can be a blessing and a curse: It’s a blessing to be able to work from wherever, but it’s a curse to constantly feel pressure to perform.

Gone are the days of going home and being unreachable by work. Thus, it’s important to make sure wage and hour laws are being adhered to and that employees are maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Mind your delivery

Picture yourself going to a restaurant. Your server tells you that they are out of a dish that you were looking forward to eating. If your server flippantly says, “We’re out of that,” it may irritate you. However, if your server says, “I’m sorry, but we ran out of that. I’d love to get you something else that you would enjoy,” it makes a world of difference. The message is the same, but the tone may alter how it’s perceived.

It helps to think about who you are talking to. If you have a prior relationship with someone, you may know them well enough to tailor your message to them. If I know I'm talking to someone who can be a bit sensitive, I may deliver my message accordingly. If I know I am talking to a colleague who learns best visually about contracting with complex entities, maybe I'll sketch it out.

If I don't know the person I am talking to well, I strive to be clear in my message and see how they respond to it and understand it. This is one of the many benefits of active listening skills.

Parting words

The topic of how to better communicate could take up whole books, but the bottom-line message is to constantly work on being a better communicator because it saves you and your company time, headaches, and, often, money.

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products.