Successful Supervisor 72 Didn't You Read my Email?

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

My work with supervisors often focuses on communication. Reason: Poor communication is the #1 complaint in most employee satisfaction surveys. Habitually, communication has been a major bone of contention in organizations. Even though communication tools have morphed into all kinds of wonderful technologies, the problem is still there and even is worse today because many managers tend to rely too much on electronic means to communicate information.

For the past decade, the majority of workers say they need to hear information 3-5 times before they are likely to believe it. The implication is that the bar has been raised on the number of times supervisors need to communicate a consistent message before people are likely to internalize it.

The sad truth is that many supervisors put information in an e-mail and honestly believe they have communicated to people. Let's examine some of the reasons this opinion is incorrect.

People rarely read long and complex e-mails

Supervisors who put out technically well-worded messages have a vision that the employees will read every word and fully absorb all the points. Hogwash! If it takes more than about 30 seconds to read a note, most people will only skim it for the general topic and miss parts of the message.

If a manager puts out a note that is 3 pages long and takes 15 minutes to read, I suspect not 1 in 10 people are going to internalize the meaning. In fact, when most people open a note and see that the text goes "over the horizon" beyond the first page, they either delete the note without reading it or close the note and leave it in the inbox for a more convenient time.

Naturally, a more convenient time does not surface, so the note is allowed to mold in the inbox like last week's opened cheese in the refrigerator. Eventually it is thrown out in some kind of purge when the stench becomes too much to bear.

Written information needs to be augmented with verbal enhancements

The written e-mail should contain simply an outline of the salient points. True meaning should be obtained by reinforcing the key points in other forms of communication. This would also include the opportunity for personal involvement or at least dialog, so people

can ponder the meaning and impact. Questions for clarification will enhance understanding.

Important conceptual topics need a third exposure (and maybe a fourth)

Some form of summary hand out, YouTube video, voicemail, text, Skype, conference call, newsletter, or podcast should be used to solidify the information. If action is required, this is a critical step that is often not highlighted. The supervisor assumes everyone got the message by an initial e-mail and is astounded that not one of his direct reports took the action he requested.

Formatting is really important

E-mail notes should be as short and easy to digest as possible. Aim to have the message internalized at a glance and with only 15-30 seconds of attention. Contrast the two notes below to see which one would be more likely to be followed by the sales force.

Example of a poorly formatted and wordy note:

I wanted to inform you all that the financial trend for this quarter is not looking good. In order to meet our goals, I believe we must enhance our sales push, especially in the South East Region and in the West. Those two regions are lagging behind at the moment, but I am sure we can catch up before the end of the quarter. Let's increase the advertising in the local paper so that we get more buzz about the new product. The increased exposure will help now and also in the next quarter. Advertising has a way of building up sales equity. Also, I am cancelling our monthly meeting at headquarters in order to keep the sales force in the field as much as possible. This means you can give your full attention to making customer calls. I am available to travel to the regions next week if you would like to have me meet face to face with your customers. I look forward to celebrating a great success when we have our Fall Sales Meeting. Thank you very much for your extra effort at this critical time for our company... Jake Alsop

Improved format:

Let's look forward to celebrating success at the Fall Sales Meeting. Since we are currently behind the pace (particularly in the South East and Western regions) I am asking for the following:

- Increase newspaper advertising to improve exposure
- Stay in the field this month; we will skip the meeting
- Request my help with customer presentations if you want it

Thanks...Jake

The second note would be far more likely to be read and internalized. When the sales force opens up the first note, they would see an unformatted block of text that is a burden to wade through. There are no paragraph breaks to give the eyes a rest between concepts. It contains several instructions amid redundant platitudes and drivel. The second note can be internalized at a glance, and it would be far more likely to produce results. Note the use of bullets eliminates wordy construction. Use the "Golden Rule" for writing e-mails; "Write notes that you would enjoy receiving," and utilize many different forms of communication rather than relying on just e-mail.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision *or on this blog.*

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