Chapter 10 Communications

10.0 Some Observations about Communication

> *ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC PROBLEMS CAN OFTEN BE TRACED TO COMMUNICATION FAILURES. WITHOUT A CLEAR COMMUNICATION OF EXPECTATIONS, THE EMPLOYEE (OR THE MANAGEMENT) IS GOING TO DO ONE OF THREE THINGS:*

- *WHAT THEY THINK YOU WANT DONE*

- *WHAT THEY WANT TO DO*

- *NOTHING*

Most defeats in battle and in business can be traced to communication failures. People work better when they understand what is expected of them; this is as true of the relationship between employees and managers as it is of people on a project team. Expectations must be communicated clearly and should be mutually understood. The communication channels must remain open so that if there are problems in fulfilling a plan, they can be aired and dealt with.

10.1 Effective Communication - A Keystone of Successful Management

All management, be it project and/or enterprise management depends on clear communications. The most modern and up-to-date communication technology or media may not necessarily ensure effective communication.

10.2 Objectives of Communication

Cartoons on the walls of employees' work areas can be revealing. Once I was walking through a plant and passed by a cubicle where a man was working. A large cartoon was tacked to the wall above his desk, which read: " Management treats me like a mushroom. They keep me in the dark and feed me sterile chicken ____!" Now here was an individual who felt he was not getting communicated with.

What are the objectives of communication within an Enterprise, and what are some of the approaches that are effective in achieving those objectives? Communication engenders trust if it is frank. Employees in any Enterprise are bombarded by rumors. E-mail broadcast capability provides a very efficient and rapid medium for spreading them. It also provides an effective soapbox for anyone to air a grievance or perceived wrong. If Enterprise management does not communicate to its employees regularly and effectively, the rumors and grievances are all the input they have.

Enterprise management can and should provide substantive information on how the place is doing, what problems are to be faced, what good work deserves recognition, and what the leadership sees on the horizon about a year ahead that might affect employment. I believe that during downturns, management should share its objectives, expectations, and actions taken to maintain equity between the management structure and employment levels as an example. In short, if you want employees to act like they are part of the team, then treat them as team members.

Project Management communication has somewhat different objectives, aimed at coordinating project-related activities. For instance:

- Formulation and coordination of definition and planning - setting directions.

- Dissemination and maintenance of authoritative reference for the objectives, ground rules, definitions, contractual agreements -both internal and external, definition and coordination of changes to the baseline plan, assessing progress and reacting to problems.

10.3 Effective Methods of Project Communication

A. Project Management Memos

Chapter 7 discussed the purpose of these memos in integrating and coordinating a project. An example of a project management memo format is shown in Appendix 1, which was used to initiate the design to unit production cost process.

Note that there is a title and section reference. There is a purpose and/or objective stated. There is an action and responsibility statement for each affected organization, and finally there is a budget statement. Signature blocks exist for all affected organizations and the project manager, whose signature issues the memo. The document requires coordination and buy-in.

B. Program Requirements Manual

The concept of the Program Requirements Manual is discussed in detail in chapter 7. It is a dynamic compendium of all program requirements, the program management memos, program plans and decisions to provide a road map of the entire project.

C. Status Meetings

Project status meetings where all project activity leaders are represented are very effective means to review progress, technical assessments, and cost performance. Generally held weekly by the project management, this venue also provides a forum for discussing problems, upcoming events, and reactions to the data presented. As mentioned in prior chapters, they are not problem solving meetings, but rather problem identification and progress evaluation meetings. With today's video conferencing capability, these meetings can encompass widely geographically separate participation, saving immense amounts of travel time and money.

D. Team Meetings

Integrated product team meetings are similar meetings held to discuss status and in this case collaborate on problems and solutions among the team's project responsibilities. The frequency may vary and may be daily if necessary.

10.4 Effective Enterprise Management Communications

A. Staff Meetings

Weekly Staff meetings at all levels of an enterprise are a very important communication tool provided they accurately pass on the messages both downward and upward in the enterprise. The ability to hear about concerns, decisions, events, impending changes, and to respond or ask questions in real time facilitates prompt and more accurate dissemination in both upward and downward directions. They should be mandatory even if very brief.

B. Status Overview Meetings

Projects should report status to Enterprise general management, monthly in most cases, to keep them informed--not to get "helped". General management should set time aside for these meetings. Not only is it important that the front office know about problems in the event of queries from outside, but they should be hearing it from the project first. It is also a good way for Enterprise general management to show its support and interest in the project.

C. Occasional All-Supervision Meetings. with Enterprise Performance and Outlook Presentations

Enterprise general management should hold occasional meetings with all supervision to share the performance and outlook for the Enterprise. Generally, this should include one at year-end when the year's performance can be put in context and the expectations for the coming year honestly predicted. Whether good news or bad, it needs to be shared so employees know what to expect. Sometimes these projections will turn out to be off, but if the Enterprise management shared its best estimates, that will be appreciated. A portion of the meeting after presentations should be devoted to Q and A. One caution on these meetings is to assure no insider disclosures or data that has not been disclosed per SEC regulations.

It may be prudent to hold other such meetings as a result of special events or development that will affect the work force.

D. Newsletters

Letters from the Enterprise leader are useful when key events occur such as reorganizations, key personnel promotions, or when a major problem occurs that gets media coverage. This gives the boss the opportunity to give a first-hand picture to employees, quickly and clearly.

Regular newsletters have never appealed to me, because a) they have no news, and b) they create a work force to publish them and fill them when there is no news. On the other hand, when there is something to report, it is a good tool to have and employee interest stories help to maintain a team atmosphere. Perhaps today, Enterprise e-mail fulfills this need better.

E. Getting out in the Trenches

There is nothing more effective in connecting with employees, than getting out in their work areas and taking an interest in what they are doing. It is one of those things you can't do enough of. When their leaders show that they care, everyone feels better about what he or she does.

10.5 Individual Communication: Setting Objectives and Expectations with Feedback and Evaluation

It is important for managers and employees alike to set objectives and state their expectations in a receptive way. It is very helpful in establishing an effective basis of job satisfaction and performance.

A. Personal Objectives

I personally believe that every employee from top to bottom of the Enterprise should sit down with his or her supervisor, discuss expectations and establish written measurable objectives for the coming period of performance. This is a powerful communication tool if it is practiced with diligence. Since it takes a lot of supervisors' time, it often is sloughed off or done in a half-assed fashion. If done properly, it makes performance reviews a great deal easier.

B. Individual Performance Reviews

Honest and perceptive performance reviews provide important feedback to both employee and supervisor if they are conducted in conjunction with personal objectives. Performance appraisals are very sensitive subjects, and must be done fairly and objectively for all those who report to you. Feedback and job evaluation are much easier when objectives and expectations have been well discussed at the start of the performance period, and acted on during that time. This subject is discussed further in chapter 14.

C. Recognition Awards and Bonuses

A very effective way of communicating objectives, setting expectations, giving feedback on the results, and rewarding excellence is through the use of recognition and financial incentives. Money talks, and so does public recognition of achievements. When someone does a great job on an assignment, acknowledgement of that publicly is an excellent way to get continued high performance from the individual, and also gives encouragement to others. I prefer team awards for achievement, because most achievements are from teams, and these awards send a good message, encouraging teamwork. No recognition actions should, however, be cheapened by misuse or overuse.

10.6 Compensation and Incentives as Aids to Communication of Objectives

It has long been a practice to motivate senior managers on business unit performance and other objectives through the use of performance incentive bonuses, and stock options as part of their compensation plan. Bonuses have also been widely used to reward outstanding performance at all levels of employment. But relatively few businesses have used profit sharing as a means of rewarding the employees for their efforts in achieving an unusually profitable year, for instance. Those companies that do it seem to enjoy excellent labor relations and feel that this sharing enhances the Enterprise performance. This is not an easy program to get started in an Enterprise, but I believe it offers a great opportunity to get work force involvement in productivity improvements, cost savings, and better management-labor relations. It really says, "you are members of the team."

What works for people also works well for business relationships. Contract incentives are a particularly interesting subject that is discussed in depth in chapter 12.

10.7 Meetings and Formats

Meetings are excellent opportunities to communicate. The communications, however have a tendency to be top down. I have always felt that discussion should be encouraged and relevant opinions solicited. Meetings should be structured, but informal enough that constructive discussion can take place. The leader can loosen the atmosphere so that subordinate managers will not be afraid that their bosses don't want to hear from them. Status meetings should have a structured agenda where the news is presented, but questioning and constructive feedback of reaction to the presentations followed by discussion tends to prevent someone's shaping the news. The worst thing the senior management in the meeting can do is sit there like a bump on a log and not react when they see something exemplary or disturbing. At the same time, such meetings are not the place to solve problems, but rather to identify them and assign action if none is underway.

I have always been comfortable with give-and-take in meetings, and was therefore surprised to learn that many people are not comfortable with that. It must also be recognized that many bosses don't appreciate being questioned or having their agenda disrupted in a public forum. I have made this mistake more than once. The results are always unsatisfactory. If you sense that situation in a meeting environment, you have to arrange one-on-one discussion to present your view.

10.8 Quality of Communication

It is not enough to communicate. It is important that the quality of the communication be good enough to get the desired message through to the desired recipient

10.8.1 Computers No Substitute for Face-to-Face Meetings and Printed Material

What goes out over the Ethernet is often lost in the ether.

Broadcasting data or program decisions is often ineffective. This seems to be because so much e-mail is copying others that it ends up like junk mail, and dilutes the important data. Retention is also poor. Archiving can help, but that requires discipline on the part of the receiver. The fallacy of the paperless society is that it generates more paper, not less.

10.8.2 Coordination Tricks, Stalls, and Countermeasures

I found over the years that some people avoid buy-in on decisions by simply failing to act and sign off on a coordinated document. Sometimes a subordinate of the affected manager simply keeps it circulating for comments. It is often an attempt at a pocket veto. Another ploy is not to come to the coordination meetings or the negotiating table. The solution to this problem was simple enough. If a key player failed to attend or send a representative to a coordination meeting, the results of the meeting were documented and distributed. A time limit was established and announced by which if there was no response, that manager's failure to respond would be noted and taken as tacit approval.

10.8.3 Some Pitfalls to Avoid

> NEVER WRESTLE WITH A PIG. YOU BOTH GET DIRTY AND THE PIG LIKES IT.
> COROLLARY: NEVER ARGUE WITH AN IDIOT. THE SPECTATORS MAY NOT DISCERN WHO IS WHO.

I have to admit that I have violated this advice more than once, and I remember each instance with embarrassment. Some people try to use a meeting as a forum to promote their agenda, and you can get sucked into this kind of trap if you aren't careful. A meeting with a large audience is not the best place to pursue an argument, even if you know you are right. Just murmur "incredible!" and you'll feel better. (See section 10.8.4 C for clarification)

10.8.4 Some Useful Tongue-in-Cheek Concepts

A. The Veracity Factor - A Concept for Evaluating Communication

Many years ago, as a new program manager, I chanced to be in the audience for an erudite presentation. I observed that several speakers as well as some of the critics in the audience exhibited, in varying degrees, some compelling characteristics. As the presentation progressed, with give and take from the audience, I became increasingly aware that what I saw and heard could be categorized and evaluated by use of solid engineering principles. This led to the formulation of a powerful communication evaluation concept.

The concept is the **Veracity Factor**, which can be used to evaluate the content of presentations -- and audience reaction for that matter. This veracity factor or index is a density function having the units of bullshit per cubic mouthful.

The numerator is universal, being measured in terms of volume or weight. The units of the denominator -- cubic mouthfuls -- is less known, but is derived from the standard cubic mouthful, or Herman. This standard measure of volume grew to satisfy the need for a convenient engineering tool for calibrating compliant volumes. I am told that Herman is encased under glass at Versailles near the silver metric standard.

Now, there is an interesting but somewhat esoteric facet of the veracity factor. The units are analogous to the reciprocal of signal-to-noise ratio. Having been a guidance and controls systems engineer, I noted that if you advise someone (who generally doesn't have a clue) exhibiting a high veracity factor that he or she has a high one, *they will very often go proudly telling others that you said so.* Thus, the application of the veracity factor tends to be self-regulating.

All of us are ratable by concepts like the veracity factor.

B. The Stamp - Prompt Feedback

Another tool I have seen employed for immediate but less humane feedback is the rubber BULLSHIT stamp. The usage, when you can no longer endure the high noise to signal, is to go over to the overhead projector and apply the stamp in real time. I guarantee it will bring things to a halt. Of

course, there are drawbacks, and it isn't really in the spirit of this book.

C. Alternative Usage

You probably shouldn't use the rubber stamp on your boss or any other person who may have direct influence over your future employment -- even if you are sure that it applies. In this circumstance, one alternative is to murmur "Incredible!" at the appropriate point.

10.9 Summing Up

Communication is one of the biggest challenges of effective management. It isn't easy, and sometimes it seems that the message just doesn't get through. The bottom line is that no news is bad news in the operation of an Enterprise or a project, or any relationship for that matter. So, good communication is worth the effort, no matter how much effort it is. And don't feed the troops fertilizer. You are always being rated.

Now that we have explored a few of the issues of communication, we will move on in the next chapter to look at ways of communicating and dealing with those who do not necessarily share the values we have described in this book.