

A Communication Culture

More to do with culture than communication



By Maureen F. Fitzgerald

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD about the importance of creating a "communication culture." You know, an idealistic culture that supports cross-organizational communication, where information flows effortlessly, and everyone in the company has access to the information they need to be effective and efficient.

Although such a culture is ideal, efforts at achieving it often fail. This is because creating a communication culture has almost nothing to do with communication and almost everything to do with culture.

Communication is simply the means by which we exchange information. Communication takes the form of

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speaking, listening, body language, systems and even silence. Therefore we often assume that the way to enhance organizational communication is to increase such things as speaking and listening and to build systems to promote information exchange. We design reporting structures and create technological tools to support more regular and varied communication, yet nothing seems to improve.

Underneath all of these efforts lies your organizational culture, which either encourages or discourages the very things you are trying to improve. Your corporate culture impacts every single conversation and can bring even the most creative and expensive attempts at improving corporate communication to its knees.

Culture consists of all of the hidden and often unconscious rules by which we behave. It controls our desire and our ability to communicate. Since cultures are created over very long periods of time, they are usually well established and thus slow to shift.

Knowing this, the only sure way to build a communication culture is by creating a collaborative culture. This is a culture where people not only work collaboratively, but more importantly, want to work collaboratively. People are motivated, not so much by external rewards such as remuneration, but by internal motives such as a desire to have things work more effectively—personally, professionally and organizationally.

Read the following, and see if you recognize your company culture.

In a "paternalistic culture," those who own or manage the organization usually feel they must take care of people. Managers tend to be fully responsible for all plans, implementation and results. Workers are often kept in the dark and are viewed as tools to help management do their job. Underneath this culture is a general suspicion that workers are not to be trusted, tend to be lazy and need continual monitoring.

In an "information culture," the heads of the company usually make the decisions about how things should be done. They usually design the processes, tell the workers what to do and teach them how to do it. Managers will try to keep workers informed and will usually request feedback from employees and sometimes clients. Underneath this culture is a belief that those higher in the corporate hierarchy are more intelligent and better problem solvers than those lower on the totem pole.

In a "participatory culture," the CEO and senior managers will try to engage employees in as much corporate decision-making as possible. Managers will regularly seek input and creative ideas from workers and particularly those in contact with clients and customers. They will hold focus groups and build in feedback systems to capture creative ideas. Usually these ideas are considered and implemented. Underneath this culture is a belief that the front-line workers' experiences are valuable to the continual improvement of the organization.

In a "collaborative culture," every worker shares in the operations of the company—from strategy to implementation and delivery. Workers are full partners and managers simply create a place where individuals can excel individually and as a group. Employees often view each other as colleagues and know what each other does and how they can help. Beneath this culture lies the belief that most people are fully developed responsible human beings who welcome the opportunity to work hard and enjoy helping others succeed.

If you really want a communication culture, you need to have workers who truly want to share information and ideas. This motivation comes from inside each individual and will grow to the extent you and your organizational culture desire and allow it. ♻️

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