

ROGER D'APRIX: Communicating culture down the line

Roger D'Aprix, vice president of ROI Communications, and author of *Communicating for Change* is convinced that the quality of an organization's internal communication is determined by its culture. "If the corporate culture is open, receptive to candor and democratic in tone, organizational communication will flourish and create a virtuous cycle in which communication itself will reinforce the openness of the culture," he explains. "If on the other hand the culture is closed, hierarchical and autocratic, communication will be cautious, highly filtered and subject to endless approval. In short, it will be limited."

Leadership drives culture and sets the tone

According to D'Aprix, leadership communication is the key factor in establishing an open, democratic corporate culture in which people are free to express their opinions. "Senior leadership sets the culture of an organization by effectively giving people permission to be honest and candid and demonstrating a willingness to listen to conflicting views," he says. "A wise leader works to create the kind of culture that he or she believes will maximize the effectiveness of the organization."

As D'Aprix points out, new companies that trade on their values tend to be set up by entrepreneurs who had been dissatisfied with the culture of the companies they'd worked for in the past and wanted to do things differently. "They also have no history so their founders have the perfect opportunity to create their ideal culture," he adds.

Even when such organizations grow large, their core culture, and the shape and structure of their internal communication continue to be defined by the strong personality of a charismatic founder or leader. "Leadership sets the tone of the organization," says D'Aprix. "People are always looking to the leadership to set an example. They model their behavior on what they experience and see and that influence can permeate the whole organization."

Helping line managers share culture-shaping messages

According to D'Aprix, the primary role of the internal communication function is to facilitate the communication of leadership messages to every level of the organization and make sure that they're understood. However, he believes that many communication professionals focus their efforts in other directions. "Sadly, their inclination is to become media focused and reactive," he says. "They regularly fail to come to grips with the fact that line management is a critical communication force. The internal communication function needs to help ensure that line managers have the necessary motivation, tools and training to communicate effectively with their teams."

D'Aprix highlights two important communication tactics that help to build and maintain effective line manager communication.

1. Establishing accountability

According to D'Aprix, many organizations suffer from a communication deficit because line managers are not held accountable for their communication role. "The general assumption is that communication somehow just happens, but that's a naïve assumption," he says. "The communication function needs to work with HR and others to establish the necessary management accountability in the form of positive incentives, so that people are rewarded for communicating effectively, or there are negative consequences for people who choose to ignore that part of their role. Accountability is key to effective communication down the line, which is an essential part of building and sustaining an open and positive corporate culture."

2. Supporting line manager communication

The internal communication function can support line manager communication in two key ways:

- i. By providing training – not so much in skills as in awareness of the need for effective line manager

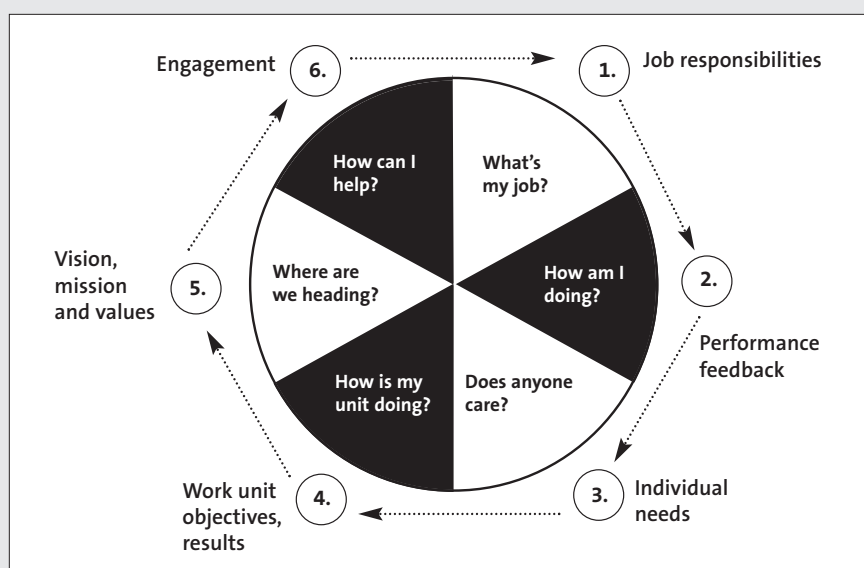
communication – and promoting an understanding of this part of the line manager’s role; and

- ii) By ensuring that line managers have the information they need to communicate in a timely fashion. “When important announcements or changes are made, it’s important for the comms team to supply materials, talking points, PowerPoint presentations or whatever it takes for people to communicate effectively,” explains D’Aprix.

Line managers’ role in communicating vision and values

Despite the increase in remote working and the adoption of e-mail, instant messaging, voicemail, texting, blogging, video messaging and so on in corporate communication, D’Aprix remains convinced that face-to-face communication remains the most effective channel for line manager communication. “It’s incumbent on managers not to rely on technology as a surrogate for interacting with employees,” he explains. “They need to understand that one of their primary responsibilities is helping their teams to understand the vision, values and objectives of the organization as well as listening to their concerns, coaching and mentoring.”

Figure xxx The Manager’s Communication Model by Roger D’Aprix



To this end, the Manager’s Communication Model that D’Aprix created over 20 years ago remains valid as it defines line manager communication responsibilities in terms of providing the answers to six key questions, each of which relates to a matching organizational principle (see Fig. XXX, above).

D’Aprix maintains that the visual collaboration inherent in face-to-face meetings is key to engaging employees on an emotional level and creating a culture of belonging. “People respond to human touches and look for evidence that they count for something. Face-to-face communication shows individual employees that their manager – and by association their company – cares about them and what they contribute to the organization.”

Creating a culture of belonging: a joint responsibility

D’Aprix highlights the critical importance of maintaining dialogue at all levels of the organization in order to create a culture of belonging. “The effective organization recognizes that it must build a community of like-minded people who have a sense of being connected together in a worthwhile enterprise,” he says.

The responsibility for this is shared between line managers and the internal communication function. The line manager deals with day-to-day communication while the internal communication function presents the backdrop – the big picture.

“In today’s information society, employees need to understand the vision and values of the organization to help them engage fully in the enterprise. It’s a critical part of the internal communication function, working in concert with leadership to make sure that people understand the overall perspective,” says D’Aprix.

“It’s then the role of the line manager to be the interpreter – to help people understand how their individual and team roles and objectives fit into the big picture. The fact that people need a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves is evidenced by the popularity of shirts, sweatshirts and caps bearing company logos. The desire to be part of something important is where human psychology touches the workplace.”

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