

Communication Imperative: Dialoguing with employees in anxious times

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With all the recent bad news on the economic front, it's not surprising that many Canadian employees are feeling nervous about their job's security. The Build a Better Workplace poll of 1100 Canadian employees conducted by Ipsos Reid at the end of January indicated that 24% of employees are concerned about being laid off. Levels of concern were higher among private sector employees than those in the public sector, and highest in the manufacturing sector, especially in Ontario where many people are engaged in the automotive sector.

What is the implication of this statistic for management today? If one in four people arrive at work each day somewhat distracted because of their future, isn't it reasonable to assume that this makes it harder for managers to keep staff focused and performing at the peak of their potential?

Some managers may feel that, in today's economy, people should be thankful they still have a job. Some may feel that there is nothing they – or anyone – can do about the situation, so it is the obligation of each employee simply to 'grin and bear it'. Whether this is a valid perspective or not, the question arises: Is there anything managers should know that would help them communicate effectively, given the current state of mind of their personnel?

In the poll, employees were asked whether the organization they work for had communicated to them about the current situation. Half (52%) indicated that their employer had not done so.

One of the key findings of the poll is that executives and managers do not seem to get much information either (47% and 52% respectively).

Overall, of those who indicated their employer had indeed communicated, only about half felt that their employer had done a good job of the communication.

The most critical respondents concerning the quality of communications are found in organizations where lay offs have occurred or are planned.

Does this mean that all organizations should be communicating about the situation? The problem is that sometimes people find it too awkward to mention the elephant in the room. The elephant's presence is obvious, and not mentioning it can make the awkwardness worse. In the current environment, the economy is the elephant. Even in companies that are relatively unscathed by the current situation, not mentioning the situation can serve to raise tension.

Many might argue that since the economic difficulties are obvious, making a point of communicating about it may serve only to raise concerns. If a company that is doing well raises the issue, won't this prompt staff to become concerned?

It is true that poor communications will certainly raise doubts and aggravate concerns. Management should probably bear in mind that the stress associated with uncertainty and 'not knowing' is often greater than the stress associated with dealing with difficult challenges.

As indicated in a recent Ipsos article (Employee Wellbeing: New Rules for a Better Workplace – March 2009), Canadian employees' stress levels are currently significant.

Moreover, when communication does not come from 'official' internal sources, 'informal' sources tend to prevail. Since 'organizational nature' hates a vacuum, rumours will fill in the void if the lack of communication lasts too long. Rumours are disruptive. They often fuel anxiety and often impact staff motivation. Ultimately, they can undermine an entire organization. Rumours travel very fast. They are no longer confined to the organization. Remember that over 20,000,000 Canadians are on social networking sites!

If management tries to 'correct' what they consider misinformation, they are in a defensive position: managers react to rumours instead of sharing their vision.

In fact, Ipsos research on best performing organizations (BPOs) indicates that 'destabilized' organizations are characterized by the prevalence of informal information channels.

As illustrated in the chart below, four types of organizations are identified in Ipsos research: Best Performing Organizations; Established Organizations; Organizations in Transition; Organizations in Crisis.

	North America	BPOs	Established Org.	Org. in Transition	Org. in Crisis
Manager	1	1	1	1	2
Colleagues	2	2	2	2	3
E-mail	2	2	2	2	2
Meetings	2	2	2	2	3
Rumours	2	4	3	1	1
Intranet	3	3	3	3	3
Internal Mags.	3	3	4	3	4
Senior Mgmt.	3	2	3	4	5

Source = Ipsos Representative Employee Database

The hierarchy of information channels is significantly different depending on the type of organization and their performance level.

Reach measures whether or not consumers can find the newly designed package on the shelf and, if they can, whether or not they associate the new package with the correct brand. To reflect reality, Reach is measured in a competitive context.

In BPOs, all communication channels work better: meetings are more informative, the Intranet and corporate magazines provide employees with more information, managers convey a lot of interesting information, senior management plays a much more active role in internal communications.

The bottom line? This research as well as internal communication audits conducted by Ipsos show that success in communications is not based on a single source of information.

Best Performing Organizations find the 'right mix' between communication channels, between 'official' and 'informal' communications, even in an incredibly challenging environment. It is about knowing your organizational culture, understanding your people, and establishing a dialogue that works for both.