



Consistent Communications, Clear Signals

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If there is anything more critical to organizational success than clear, consistent communications, I don't know what that might be. Every company has a mission and vision statement these days, as well as a strategic plan that everyone is supposed to be working toward. However, mixed signals can derail an organization's communications and its achievement of success.

If the general foreman is taking everyone in the shop to task over safety glasses and personal protective equipment, and the people from the office are walking into the shop without that safety equipment, a mixed signal is sent. That signal is, "They really don't mean this safety stuff; it's just for harassing us in the shop." When confronted with conflicting information, people will believe what they see with their own eyes.

Here are some tips to help keep your communications effective, focused and receivable, courtesy of the 5W-2H methodology.

Who is involved in the communication? Who should be? Are there other people around who are not involved in this particular communication? Private communications build connection better than group broadcasts.

Consider the audience. For a craftsman working on multiple machines, watching multiple

parameters on multiple parts and also trying to get his area cleaned up, a page filled with statistics might not be the most effective way to communicate the importance of wearing safety equipment. A photo of someone injured, along with a brief verbal explanation of how it happened, will likely grab his attention.

What are we trying to accomplish? What are we trying to communicate? Some subjects are better suited for a casual discussion or conversation. Others merit a more formal approach. Conveying a lot of detailed information is probably not very effective in a noisy or distracting environment. Trying to convince people of the importance of their gaging or quality reporting deserves a more formal, deliberate method than a hurried, "Fill this out; it's important!"

When should the communication be undertaken? Is now the best time? Is the information to be shared urgent and needed immediately? Or, is it something that can wait? Respecting the other person's time is a means to ensure that your comments are received in the most favorable circumstances.

Where should the communication take place? Where the first contact occurred? Out at the machine? In the break room or training room? In the supervisor's office? Besides the obvious need to avoid distractions and ensure the safety of those involved in the conversation, the location communicates a context, while implying a sense of importance

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and gravity. Formality is a tool that emphasizes the power of our message when used correctly. Ignored, it can send confusing signals about whether the message is indeed important or just a casual conversation.

Why are we communicating?

Strictly speaking, whatever is being communicated has to conform somehow to the company's mission, vision and strategic plan. If the mission is, "quality parts for quality customers" and the message communicated is, "we're late; those pieces don't need to be that high in quality," then you can forget about that employee ever understanding what "quality parts" means.

Quality means conformance to requirements, and your communications must be consistent on this score. Does everything that you say have to tie in to some abstract mission or vision statement? Of course not.

Perhaps your point of saying, "Hi, glad to see you this morning" is to show a sense of belonging

and appreciation for the person being addressed. The point needs to be that there is a reason and a message, whether expressed directly or implied. Your words and your actions are two signs of your intent.

How do we communicate?

Verbally, through face-to-face conversations, of course. Also, through meetings—formal or casual. Yes, using e-mails, memorandums, letters, notices on a bulletin board or notes left by the machine are all ways of communicating. But what about other, less obvious means, such as signs, housekeeping, maintenance and the condition of our stuff? And don't overlook the most important ways to convey feelings and emotional content—smiles, facial expressions, eye contact and body language.

How many people are we trying to communicate with?

What is the most effective number for the message and its importance? Some matters are best handled individually so the the strongest impression can be conveyed. Other matters need to be widely received,

so group meetings might be most effective. Don't forget following up with personal contact to lock in the importance of the message. Also, don't ignore the potential of others in the group to influence the receipt of your message.

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Having the right people, in the right place, with the right message, at the right time, is crucial to effective communications. Being consistent in matching our actions to our words ensures that our audience really gets it. Otherwise, our listeners are left trying to figure out which to believe—our words or our actions. Matching words and actions lets listeners concentrate on the message. ■

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