

# How to Communicate With Your Employees

by Robert L. Dilenschneider

How many times have you read: "Employees are our most important asset"? How can you say that employees are our most important asset and yet not be open and inclusive in the process of obtaining buy-in on critical and basic decisions? Some companies even make it difficult for employees to understand quarterly financial results when those same employees are stockholders. Why is it that if employees are truly so important to the success of most modern enterprises, they are frequently the last audience considered for important announcements and the first audience targeted for cost reductions? It is a dilemma that you will face regularly.

A letter accompanying an invitation to a seminar on change at corporations carried the statement that the biggest lie most companies tell is that "people are our most important asset. This is a total fabrication," the author wrote. "Companies treat people like steel, oil, gas, or other materials. If people are their most important asset, there should be a dramatic increase in investments in people."

The answer quite simply is that it is much easier to measure a return on investment from physical or capital expenditures for bricks and mortar than it is to measure a return on investments in human resources. As a result, managers invest in what they know traditionally produces results.

All of this can be reduced to one word: Credibility. Employees want to know why they should believe what you write or say. In many, but certainly not all, cases with the conflict between what management says and does, how can you be credible? It seems so obvious. Be honest and tell the truth. Not that managers want to dissimulate. It is a question of risk aversion and the unpredictable nature of future events in most organizations. It is essential to effective communications to gather and use specific, factual information.

In other words, be willing to share truly useful information with employees. Do not fear that providing either detailed data, financial results, or negative news will destroy your credibility. Most employees are mature and sophisticated information users. Do not fear overcommunicating or sending too detailed information either. Be willing to send more information and let employees decide how best to use it. A surfeit of information is better than not enough.

Aside from the method and quantity of your communications get to the heart of credibility by telling the whole story. Use negative information to build credibility. You lost a customer. Say so. You want to tell the employees that you won some big, new customer, too. Fine. Credible communications means factual and balanced. The least believable information involves propagandistic bombast. When State Farm Insurance presents its positions on public issues, the company's backgrounders for the news media always present the pros and cons of an issue. It improves the odds of cutting through the cynicism of a one-side argument.

Despite the difficult circumstances that managers face with employee communication, many other companies have prospered by applying professional techniques to their employee communication. The Whirlpool Corporation is an example of stepping back and addressing what is called a virtual revolution in employee communication.

*Corporatespeak Versus Employeespeak:* In fact, as Bruce Berger, vice president of corporate affairs at Whirlpool Corporation, said in an illustration for new thinking in employee communication, many managers use "corporatespeak" while employees use "employeespeak."

To better illustrate this situation, a manager at any company might say in a meeting with employees:

*Corporatespeak:* "The acquisition will assist us in leveraging our strengths, reduce costs, and strengthen our marketing efforts. Unfortunately, some redundancies will occur although we have no precise numbers of positions affected."

*Translation into Employeespeak:* "A lot of people may not be around in a year or less. With fewer people, if I decide to stay, I will have to work longer hours. I will probably have to do much more with fewer resources. The business area we are adding this acquisition to didn't cut it and that's why we paid a premium to buy an outfit that mayor may not get us more market share."

Pay particular attention to "Corporatespeak" in your own communications and try to use plain, direct "Employeespeak" whenever you can. Specifically, you may ask yourself, "*How do I make myself clearly understood?*"

The answer is that you must ask yourself if your writing or speaking, or that of your assistants in the employee communications area, is completely clear. Clear means indisputably easy to understand and without any double meanings. If not, find a way to make it clearer. The best way to do this is for you to turn on a tape recorder and start talking prior to a presentation or sit at the PC and write as the most successful business writers do.

But where to start? With persuasive writing assignments, you should begin by crafting a few key messages. A message is nothing more than a simple sentence that contains a number of facts about a situation. As an example, a message in an employee letter might be:

"I encourage you to make a pre-tax contribution to this 401(k) plan *because it is the most effective way for you to build your retirement income and shelter your current income.*"

A second message might be:

*"To encourage you to contribute up to the allowable maximum, I've asked our chief financial officer, Tim Miller, to match your contribution with 50 cents for every dollar you invest."*

And finally:

*"To make it as easy as possible, contributions will be deducted and invested in the funds you have selected with each auto matic payroll deduction."*

Establish a conversational style that is less formal. It includes contractions and speaks to the other person in the second person you. (Even French presidents now ask their assistant to use the second person in addressing them, tu instead of the more formal vous.) If you can talk through the subject and explain it clearly with two or three short messages, try it out with your spouse, a friend, or a trusted employee. But work on the points by writing them out before you rehearse the presentation.