TALKING LIKE

LEADERS

Communicating
in the Workplace

A. William McVey • Patrice Manuel • Steve Ervin

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Talking Like Leaders:
Communicating in the Business World

Introduction

Silence is not golden

Business managers may think they are making all the right moves with customers, shareholders, regulators or others key players. They may hit their profit goals, know the competition and have a savvy eye for new opportunities.

But as much as they understand the complex nature of managing a business, they often overlook something pretty simple: the need to communicate with employees.

Though we are well into our Information Age, an astonishing number of businesses are not exchanging much information with their own employees – the very people who make the company tick.

In this book, *Talking Like Leaders,* we tap our collective experience as business managers and consultants to explore this peculiar communication chasm in corporate America. We will look at why it exists and how it can be bridged.

We will provide insights into what *is* and is *not* effective communication and how to better use our language. We will close with a chapter on what may be the greatest return of all on communication: loyalty.

Let's start with a fair question: Why is communicating with employees so important?

***Good employees want more than a paycheck***

They want to feel valued

Good employees want more than a paycheck. They want to feel valued. A large part of that is being asked their opinions. They want to participate in the decision-making process. How is that supposed to happen if their bosses don't engage them in conversation?
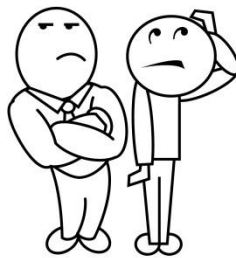
An ignored employee is likely to suffer
slumping morale and productivity

An ignored employee is likely to suffer slumping morale and productivity, which can't be good for a company's output. This could be especially true for companies in the service or retail industry, where many employees have direct contact with customers. Unhappy employees may project their mood on consumers, dampening the company's image. There is a risk of them treating customers the way they are treated themselves. They will also tend to go around their supervisor's back to get something done or worse yet, to discredit the company.
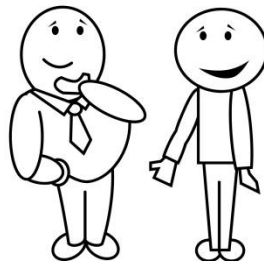
The flip side of this grim scenario is a business that realizes employees are its greatest
resource

The flip side of this grim scenario is a business that realizes employees are its greatest resource. Studies have shown that companies that put a priority on communication will produce greater shareholder returns. Communicating with employees builds their trust and respect for management. It is likely to solidify their loyalty, give them a healthy team-like attitude and reduce turnover. The cost to replace lost employees is much higher than working to keep them in the first place.

There are other upsides to good communication, not the least of which is that it will help employees keep informed. Rumors and bad information can circulate around offices. Communicating regularly and effectively can keep that to a minimum. Address rumors as promptly as possible. Rumors left hanging in the air can fester, harming future projects and growth.

A good manager should always have an eye open for employees with potential to move up. Talking to that employee, tapping his or her thoughts and ideas can be an important gauge of that potential, or possibly of skills that could be used in a different area of the business. People are motivated in various ways. You can tell what drives them by paying attention to what they talk about. A motivated employee is bound to be more productive than one who does not find his or her work motivating.

Most of all, though, regular talks with employees is an important source for innovation. No one knows how a business operates more intimately than employees who work it every day. They can be a wealth of ideas, large and small, to help a business grow and improve. Encourage their feedback, no matter how off-the-wall their ideas might seem.

They can also alert you to issues or trends that may be hurting business. There is nothing more valuable to an organization than shared knowledge.

Nothing is more valuable than shared knowledge

In short, employees can open a business manager's eyes. Make employees aware you want the message, for good or bad, and you will never shoot the messenger. The more comfortable employees feel about speaking up, the more ideas will come forth. In today's highly competitive atmosphere it is exceedingly innovative organizations that will win.

Clearly, then, there are plenty of sensible reasons for business managers to have dialogue with employees. This book explores how to get that accomplished.

Chapter One
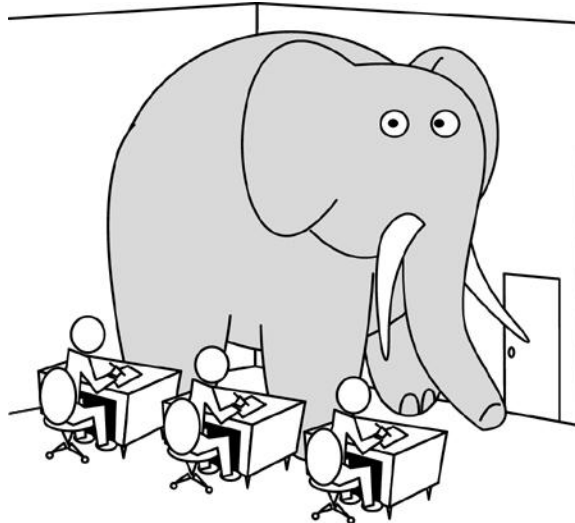
Why leaders won't talk

If communication with employees is good business, as we detailed in our introduction, why do so many business leaders fail miserably at it?

It's a question they should ask themselves, assuming they understand the need to communicate in the first place. Hard as it may be to believe, some people rise through the corporate ranks without paying much attention to the need to communicate. Maybe as employees they kept quiet, did what they were told and did it well. "The boss and I didn't talk much, but I got promoted so what's the problem?" he might ask. The culture of quiet seems comfortable, even productive.

In truth, however, most leaders realize that a business is better off with communication than without it. They know that it helps morale, can generate innovation and help the bottom line. So if communication is still not occurring in these workplaces, there have to be reasons.

Let's go down the list of why managers, CEOs and other corporate leaders don't or won't communicate:

Arrogance: A boss may simply believe that talking with employees down the food chain is unnecessary and a waste of time. Employees are seen as foot soldiers who should toe the corporate line. "It's what they are paid to do," bosses reason. The executive may think he or she knows it all – no need to hear from anyone else. This kind of attitude can certainly make for icy relationships between employees and management, but it exists in more offices than managers will admit.

> *The executive may think he or she knows*
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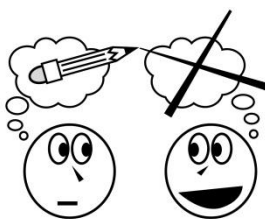
Insecurity: Some managers are afraid that if they talk to employees in any depth they will learn just how smart they are about the business. If the employees come up with too many good ideas, the boss may start feeling insecure. Better the unknown than the known. This damming-up of possible employee feedback due to insecurity is nothing but self-serving management.

Fear: The office, like the world, has become increasingly focused on political correctness. A boss who once created good will by casual conversation with employees may now be afraid that a comment or compliment could be viewed as somehow inappropriate, especially if it is to a subordinate. In addition, if the boss chats with one employee more than another, it could be taken as a form of favoritism. So, the manager figures that the best way to avoid misunderstandings, grievances or even lawsuits is to not talk to employees much at all. But that is a cop-out. Courses in workplace behavior, such as diversity training, are easily accessible. Even a good measure of common sense should allow bosses to avoid making offensive comments. Saying nothing is not the answer.

Quiet personality: Let's face it, even highly accomplished people can be shy or reserved. Employees with reticent bosses shouldn't assume they are snobs, paranoid or clueless. Sometimes they are simply not outgoing or are uncomfortable talking to people they don't know well, even if they are their employees.

This person may prefer to communicate with employees through the chain of command. But this only succeeds to the degree that supervisors down the line use good communication practices that draw out the best in employees. If they reflect the same low-key personality of the boss, the communication could be bottled up at every level.

In love with e-mail: For every manager who doesn't really like to talk with employees in person, the advent of email is a godsend. E-mails are quick, to the point and impersonal. No need to buttonhole an employee or call her into the office for a conversation that may go off in a tangent. (Never mind that this dialogue might be productive). These people aren't necessarily adverse to talking with employees, but instant electronic communication is simply ingrained in their work habits. As young techies gradually move into more positions of authority in corporate America, the decline of face-to-face communication can only continue.
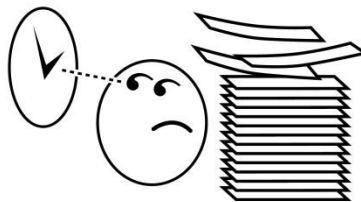
Little time: Recessions take a toll on business. Often, they result in cuts to middle management ranks. As a result, managers left behind take on more responsibility. That leaves them less time to talk with employees individually or in groups. This is a fact of life, but managers simply must continue to make personal communication a priority, even

if they have to delegate other responsibilities.

These are just some of the reasons why managers don't communicate. But it is not enough simply to understand what is happening. These managers have to know how to do something about it. The chapters ahead are a path in that direction.

Chapter Two

Talking effectively

All communication is not equal. There are effective ways to communicate and there are ill-advised ways that can be almost as bad as not communicating at all.

In this chapter we will look at how to talk to employees. There are variables, of course. Employees are not clones. You will sometimes have to tailor your words to an employee's personality and position. Timing is also important. What you say to a new employee who is just learning the job may differ from what you say to an experienced employee you know well.

But there are basic communication means and methods that make sense when dealing with virtually all employees. That is what we will explore here.

We break communication down into three categories: high talk, medium talk and low talk. Aim for the high talk, but understand that you will slip up occasionally and fall into the realm of medium or low talk. When you recognize that happening, apologize to the employees, think about how it happened, learn from the lapse and move on.

Here are the elements of high, medium and low talk:

High Talk

Ding!

Respect
Face to Face
Idea Exchange
Brainstorms
Expansion
Creativity
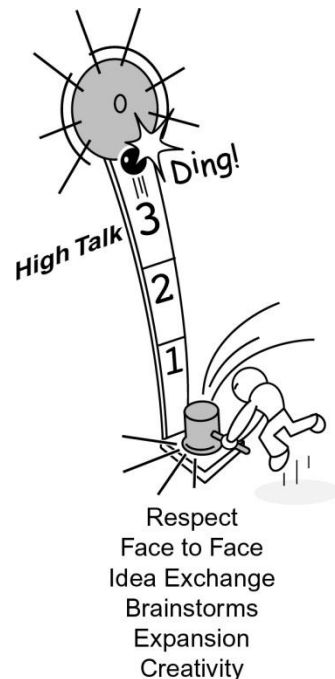
High talk: What is high talk? For starters, it means dialogue. High talk is a two-way conversation with your employees, not one in which the boss dominates. It is meaningful conversation in which the leader both asks and invites questions. Respect is shown for the employee and his or her opinion. Open dialogue is encouraged. There are no agendas. It is imperative to allow ample time for this dialogue. The employee should feel he or she is getting your undivided attention. A workplace of high dialogue is one where conversation flows smoothly and productively.

High talk is creative. It is about discussing alternative ways to solve an issue or problem. It's about tossing out ideas and encouraging the employee to do the same. There is little fear of being belittled or second-guessed. High talk is enlightened and mature. A person who regularly engages in high talk is secure and wants employees to be secure, too.
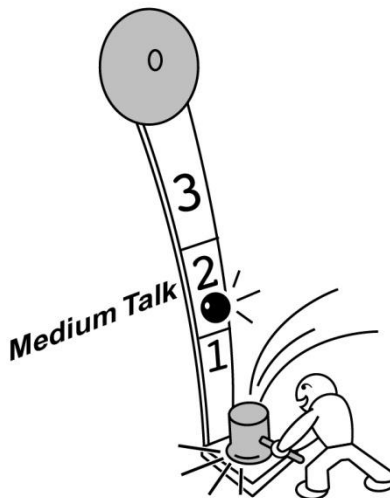

Open Questions
Text messages
Questionnaires
Portals

Medium talk: Medium talk is the ability to have a skilled discussion rather than to force one's views. It is hearing out employees and offering feedback, but it lacks the creative capacity of high talk. Medium talkers may want to simply make a point or get an answer without entertaining other ideas or solutions.

Medium talk can be talk in transition. A medium talker may be trying to move from no talk or low talk to a higher level of communication. The person may realize his or her conversations are one-sided or that the employee isn't getting proper deference. Medium talkers start asking open-ended questions of employees and allow time for reflection. They don't fear dead space in a conversation. At this stage, they are learning to become high talkers.

A medium talker can be someone who fluctuates between high and low talk. Even people skilled in high talk will lapse into medium talk or even low talk in some situations or when under pressure.
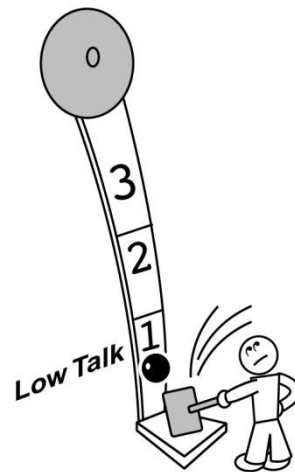
Uneasy silence
Emails
Degrading speech
Dictatorship
Rant

Low talk: Low talk is everything high talk is not. Low talk is monopolizing a conversation and paying little attention to what an employee says. Low talk is a monologue. Low talk can be preachy.

Contrary to showing respect for employees, low talk puts them down. Low talk gives employees no benefit of the doubt about their intelligence or sensitivity. It assumes that because they may rank low on the work ladder they can be given the conversation short shrift. Hardly talking to employees at all is low talk, even if it is cordial.

Low talk is reprimanding an employee off in front of co-workers. Low talk would be accusing an employee of making a mistake without finding out if it was his fault or before getting an explanation. At worst, low talk is sending an e-mail to employee to discipline or fire them rather than doing it face-to-face.

Understanding the principle of high talk doesn't count for much if it isn't put into practice

Defining these three levels of talk can be useful as a tool and a reference point. It helps us convey to others what form of communication is or is not occurring at any given time. We can catch ourselves berating an employee undeservedly and know we are in low talk. Or, we have a conversation that leads to a great idea and realize that was high talk.

Understanding the principle of high talk doesn't count for much if it's not put into practice. Let's look at some of the forums for high talk.

Be seen.

One is interpersonal contact, or what you can call "management by walking around." Leaders at all levels of a business should be seen around the office or other work place. On the way to the coffee room, for instance, pause briefly to chit-chat with employees. At the least nod, smile and say hello. If time allows, ask how everything is going and let them know you are always available to talk about any concerns or ideas. This interaction is high talk in that it shows you care. But refrain from talking to the same employees every day. Take different paths through the office so you are likely to meet a variety of employees. A boss in their midst will get employees' attention and no one should feel repeatedly slighted.

Be inclusive.

Employees who work in other locations should not be ignored. When practical, bosses should visit those offices to share information or take questions. And remember that if bulletin boards are used in the main office to post announcements about the company, those same notices should be posted at satellite offices when pertinent. All employees need to feel informed. One way to retain face-to-face contact with employees off-site is through web cams. Have coffee at the same time and chat over web cams about light or not-so light issues. This personal approach is high talk.

Use e-mail judiciously.

As we said in the previous chapter, e-mail is the preferred mode of employee contact for many business leaders. But e-mail is not prone to meet the high talk standard. It is impersonal and can be written when emotions run high. Besides, there is no guarantee employees will even read it.
E-mail does not necessarily save time. How often have you exchanged multiple e-mails with an employee when picking up the phone or asking the employee to stop by could have resolved the issue in a few minutes?

E-mails also have the potential to be misunderstood, especially if written in a hurry or if the sender is not an expressive writer. Anything an employee really needs to know should be conveyed by phone or in person. If e-mail is used, at least follow up to make sure it was received and understood. Careless communication is not high talk. Another major flaw with sending e-mails to employees is that they may be shared with other employees or the outside world. Never send an e-mail that would create a problem if it was read by anyone but the recipient.

Establish an open-door policy where
employees know they can talk about their
ideas, concerns or grievances

Have an open-door policy.

There are, of course, serious business or personnel issues that can't be discussed by walking around the office or by sending e-mails and text messages. These discussions are best done in private, but not only at the boss's initiative. An office setting of high talk is one where leaders have made clear their accessibility. Employees who have something to say about their work or job are going to speak to someone, so you should be first on that list. Strong leaders welcome good and bad feedback. As difficult as it may be, employees must be encouraged to discuss potential issues, mistakes or problems as quickly as possible without fearing repercussions. Bad news doesn't get better with time. Establish an open-door policy where employees know they can talk about their ideas, concerns or grievances. That is good leadership.
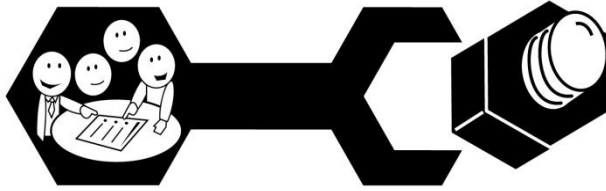
Make meetings count.

Meetings are a cornerstone of office communication. Books have been written on how to carry out meetings. We'll just say here that regular staff meetings are advisable as a way to keep current with everyone's work. Employees will know they have an appointed time each week to explain what they are doing and to get feedback and any needed directives. It keeps employees on task and underscores the supervisor's accessibility to staff. The person in charge should make sure the meetings are give-and-take. Too many times bosses do all the talking and employees are too demur to speak up. Agendas should be fluid so that any topic can be broached. A question such as "Anybody have anything else?" is a good way to keep the conversation open-ended.

Reaching out is high talk all the way

In summary, be conscious of how you talk to employees. Don't be afraid to ask them as a group or individually if you are getting through to them and if they are happy with your communication approach. Reaching out is high talk all the way.

The Authors

A. William McVey has, for ten years, been a motivational speaker, teacher and writer on the nature of leadership in a media-driven information age. He has gained a reputation as an expert on the impact of the digital age on marketing and worked as a marketing consultant for large North American financial institutions. He has degrees in philosophy, theology and an advanced degree in sociology. He lives in Leawood, Kan.

Patrice Manuel is founder, CEO and senior principal of P/Strada in Kansas City. Ms. Manuel has wide-ranging experience managing complex challenges throughout the world over a 20-year period as a U.S. Army officer. She is a certified project management professional with a master's degree in administration and a doctorate ABD in organizational development and leadership. She lives in Lenexa, Kan.

Steve Ervin, Ed. D., is president of ReVision Consulting, LLC. He has more than 25 years of consulting experience in change management, leadership development, management and supervisory development, organizational development, mission integration, process improvement and executive coaching. He has a doctorate in adult education from Indiana University and a certification as a performance coaching trainer. He lives in Lenexa, Kan.

Contributing writer:

Kevin Murphy, is a freelance writer and journalist. He was a reporter for *The Kansas City Star* from 1988 to 2008. He specializes in non-fiction books and does other writing, research and media relations. He has a bachelor's degree in communications and lives in Westwood, Kan.

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