

Did they hear what you said or wrote?

How effective is your organization's communication strategy? This is, of course, assuming there is one.

Doing HR consulting with large organizations, I often hear horror stories of either the lack of or just plain ineffective communications. Organizations with the best employee engagement, productivity and profitability know how important it is for leaders to adhere to a defined communication strategy that spells out how and when communications are sent.

Research suggests the average employee spends 70 per cent of their day communicating in some form, and miscommunication or lack of communication is one of the biggest reasons for interpersonal conflict and employee disengagement that costs companies millions of dollars in lost productivity.

For a leader to successfully implement any communication strategy they first need to appreciate the importance of six parts of a basic communication process: 1) sender (initiates message), 2) encoding (the actual physical message), 3) channel (the medium the message is sent through), 4) receiver (who the message was directed to), 5) decoding (how the receiver processes the message), and 6) feedback (process where receiver has an opportunity to question or agree with the meaning and intentions of the message).

It's not advisable for leaders to assume when they send a message it will be understood with the intention it was sent. For example, a large percentage of verbal messages get deleted, distorted and generalized. Simply asking the receiver what they heard can save a great deal of time and frustration.

How effectively a message is received depends on channel richness, which examines what kinds of communication are perceived as being routine in the organization. These have less chance for ambiguity, while non-routine communications have more chance for ambiguity.

The more complex the message, the greater the potential for ambiguity. When this is the case, it's best to select a high channel richness method such as face-to-face (video conference, speeches, teleconference). The advantage of verbal communication is a large amount of information can be shared quickly, and it often provides an opportunity for feedback.

One risk to keep in mind when messages are shared to a workforce through multiple senders is the original meaning can become distorted. While written communication has a low channel richness, it does allow for communication to be documented and stored in the format it was intended.



Most written communication is more thought out; however, it doesn't allow for immediate feedback (with the exception of email) to confirm if the receiver has processed the message correctly. And when the message has some ambiguity or is complex, the meaning can be missed.

The value of written communications that are highly routine, such as announcement of a simple benefit change, is it's faster and takes less energy than verbal communication.

A communication strategy provides the framework for how communications are addressed in an organization. It outlines the expectations and guidelines as to how and when different kinds of communications are done.

When building a communication strategy, an organization can't assume everyone will understand how to be an effective communicator or the importance of channel richness. There is value in providing a framework of core skills for effective communication.

In the process of building a communications strategy, leaders evaluate the pros and cons of how to communicate different topics, to increase the efficacy and accuracy of the communication.

Perhaps one of the best ways to increase employee engagement is to improve communication accountability by setting expectations for leaders to use the best practices that have been determined for sharing information. Finally, keep in mind that not communicating sends a powerful message that's most likely different than your intentions.

