

COMMUNICATION SOLUTIONS

for today's manager

This may be the best \$25 you'll ever spend

We just made a phone call. We called a stationery store in our hometown of Chicago and asked how much it would cost to print a batch of 200 basic business cards. The answer? \$25. That's right . . . \$25. With that kind of price, you'd have to be crazy not to have a shiny new batch of cards waiting for the individual you just promoted into a new job title. *Why?* You want employees to attack their new responsibilities with a passion, and handing them a set of business cards before the promotion has even settled in will get them off to a rousing start.

Are you waiting too long to communicate a change?

If there is big change happening in your organization, you need to start communicating now. Do not wait until you're exactly sure of every detail before sharing what you know with your team. The rumor mill is turbocharged by e-mail these days. By the time you get around to crossing every "t" and dotting every "i," your team will be awash with rumors. (And don't forget: In business, there's no such thing as a good rumor; when employees fill in the blanks, they fill them in with bad news.)

It's okay to communicate half the picture, if that's all you know. Say to your employees: "Here's what I know now. It's not complete, and it may change tomorrow, but I want to keep you in the loop."

Employees are adults. They understand that you may not know everything. And they can handle *some* uncertainty. But when big change is sweeping the company and they are hearing *nothing* from their supervisor, that's when they start to question your credibility and your authority.

Too often, the 'e' in e-mail stands for 'easy way out'

One of the hardest things a manager has to do is communicate bad news—whether it's a disciplinary matter or a layoff. That's why many cowardly managers take the easy way out and convey such information via e-mail. But resist the urge; don't give in to the temptation. The *only* way to properly communicate bad news is face-to-face. Period. Don't do it by video, don't send a memo, don't post it on your intranet. When you have to deliver news that is going to change someone's life, do the right thing: Do it in person. And build enough time into the process that you can properly answer the questions the individual is sure to have.

Slow down your listening!

How many times do you find your mind wandering when someone is talking to you? No, you're not abnormal. And you don't have attention deficit disorder. Most people speak at an average rate of about 120 words a minute. But most people can *listen* about four times faster. So your mind fills in the gaps by thinking of other things. Be

aware of this and *slow down your listening*. Force yourself to stay focused, so that you can really comprehend everything the speaker is saying.

Watch how you walk into work—they're watching

Believe it or not, something as simple as how you walk into work in the morning can set the tone for the entire day. When "The Boss" walks in, people pay attention. If you brush past a worker without saying good morning, people notice. If you snap at someone first thing, people will avoid you the rest of the day. If you seem preoccupied or upset, the "stay away from him" message will spread to your employees before you reach your desk. Take a couple of seconds before you enter the workplace to gather yourself. Walk in with a smile and stop to chat with an employee or two. It will get the day off on the right foot.

'Employees first' rule shows workers matter

Are you looking for ways to show your employees that they matter? At Standard Meat Company, in Dallas, lunch every Friday is catered for all 160 workers, and the president of the company serves the workforce. *The unwritten rule:* Employees eat first. Managers wait until everyone else is served. It's a subtle message, perhaps, but a powerful one: Employees count.

—Adapted from the Leaders Course Web site

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How far will you bend?

Before meeting with employees to kick off a new project or initiative, you should have an *idea* in your head of the schedule you want. But don't get locked into it. What seems realistic to a manager might seem outrageous to the people who actually have to do the work. So go to the meeting with *two* dates in your head: the one you want and the one you can live with. If you're not willing to bend, your employees will view you as unreasonable. And the more you work with them, the better they will work for you.

Apply the '48-Hour Rule' to employees in the field

One of the biggest challenges to communicating with a workforce is flowing information to employees who don't have access to computers. At Lockheed Martin, managers commit to what they call the "48-Hour Rule." If there is an important piece of company news, *all* employees—even those on the plant floors at remote locations—hear about it in 48 hours or less. Whether that requires emergency staff meetings, informal Town Hall meetings, or posting information in breakrooms and cafeterias, the word gets out—so employees never have to hear important news from a source outside the company.

Adding 'value' isn't always a benefit

When direct reports submit a suggestion to you, nothing will

kill their enthusiasm faster than having you add on to it, management expert Marshall Goldsmith says. "You think it's a great idea. But rather than say it's a great idea, you say, 'That's a nice idea, but you might want to add this to it.'" Though your add-on may increase the quality of the idea 5 percent, the cost may be that the staffer feels demeaned and unappreciated. Before adding value, ask yourself two questions: *Am I right?* and *Is it worth it?*

—Adapted from "Leading the Leaders: Keys to effective executive coaching," by Frank Sennett, in *Employee Recruitment & Retention*

Mentors: The next best thing to cloning yourself

It's the classic Catch-22: You can't be everywhere at once, yet each of your employees would benefit from your experience and wisdom—if you could actually spend time with them. One way around this is to encourage and reward a mentoring program—where experienced employees work with less-experienced workers and new hires. Most managers assume that a "mentoring" program has to be companywide, sponsored and supported by human resources. It doesn't. You can start a mentoring program at the grass-roots level, just within your own department. Encourage your experienced workers to spend time with junior employees—and set up a simple reward system for those who take you up on it.

Communicating electronically: What every manager needs to know

Electronic communication has become one of the most popular ways for managers to quickly and efficiently communicate with their employees. But that doesn't mean managers are doing it *right*. If you rely on e-mail to communicate, remember these seven rules:

- 1. Keep it to one screen or less.** When e-mail readers see words running off the bottom of the screen, they tend to start scanning rather than reading, potentially missing the key elements of your message. Edit yourself ruthlessly and cut out every extra word.
- 2. Write in bullet points.** Online usability tests have shown that when people read messages off a computer screen, they find it easier to read and retain the information if it is broken into bulleted points, rather than long, dense paragraphs.
- 3. Give the "meat" of the message in the subject line.** The subject line is the headline for your e-mail. It needs to grab people and tell them exactly what the e-mail is about. Here's a good formula for subject lines: *subject + active verb + object*. And be as specific as possible. "Meeting rescheduled" is a bad subject line; "Feb. marketing meeting rescheduled to Feb. 17" is a good one.
- 4. If you're sending e-mails from a wireless device, let people know.** If you are a BlackBerry user (or, as some people call them, a Crackberry addict), make sure you include a tagline telling people you're using one of those devices, which will help explain the terse nature of your message. Otherwise, you could come across as rude.
- 5. Spell-check your e-mails.** Yes, it takes an additional five seconds. But if you want to hurt your credibility, send an e-mail to 50 people with six misspelled words in it.
- 6. Encourage questions via e-mail.** Don't use it as a one-way medium. The true strength of e-mail is its interactive nature. When you blast out an e-mail to employees, make sure they know it's okay to send questions or concerns back to you. And then make time to answer them.
- 7. Remember: You're not the only one sending e-mails to your staff.** Your employees are likely suffering from "e-mail rage." They are getting organizational announcements, HR messages, facility updates, corporate-wide memos, notes from colleagues, cafeteria updates . . . to say nothing about the e-mails from friends, family, and junk-mailers. Do your best to e-mail only when you need to, so you don't add to the in-box clutter. And if you're ever worried about an important e-mail getting lost in the electronic shuffle, switch to a low-tech solution: Pick up the phone.

Start new employees' orientation the *minute* they're hired—not on their first day at work

Most large companies have formal orientation programs where the HR department delivers all the necessary paperwork and basic company information to new hires. But smart managers realize that new employees need more than this if they're going to feel comfortable in their new jobs. These managers supplement the formal program with a few tactics of their own:

1. **A welcome letter:** As soon as you make the decision to hire an individual, send a letter welcoming him or her to the company. Let the new hire know that if he or she has any questions before the official start date, it's okay to call you.
2. **An introductory walk:** Accompany the employee *yourself* on the first tour around the organization. Many managers delegate this responsibility, but doing it yourself sends the employee a powerful message: He or she is important enough to warrant your special attention.
3. **Regular chats:** Carve time from your schedule to check on the employee regularly for the first couple of weeks. Nothing is more disconcerting than to be thrown into a job and then not see your new boss for two weeks. Even if you have to build 15-minute "meetings" into your calendar to guarantee that you make time for the new hire, do it. It will be worth it in the long run.

Want to kill morale and spur backbiting? Play favorites

Whether or not you realize it, your work team is a lot like a family—and the same rules should often apply. One good parenting tip you can bring from home into the workplace is not to play favorites or let it *appear* that you're playing favorites. This was the challenge facing Custom Research Inc. when it won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality award.

The small, Minneapolis-based research firm could afford to send only 50 of its employees from multiple sites to the big celebration planned in Florida and, of course, *everyone* wanted to attend. Who to choose? Rather than basing the decision on seniority or title, management put every employee's name in a hat—including the president and the cleaning crew. It was the only way to make certain that every person at every level of the company had the same chance to attend the celebration. Now *that* is smart family management.

—Adapted from "Retaining employees and customers is a family affair," by Eileen McDargh, on the Work911.com Supersite

When does recognition become entitlement?

Do you pop for a free Friday lunch if your sales team hits its weekly numbers? If so, you could be a Habitual Recognizer. Meaning that you recognize employees in the same way at the same time on a regular schedule. Just remember: It's a fine line between recognition and entitlement. People will get used to that free lunch; they'll stop bringing lunch on Fridays; they'll take it for granted. And after a while, they won't even

appreciate it anymore. Then, the first time they miss their numbers by just a *hair* and you cancel the lunch, you'll have a morale problem on your hands. So shake up your recognition. Don't do the same thing every time. This week, buy lunch on Friday; next week, let people go an hour early; the week after, don't do anything at all! The unexpected, surprise recognition effort can be the most powerful of all.

Communication works only if you're willing to listen at least as much as you talk . . . or write

Carlos Mazzorin is one business leader who understands the importance of two-way communication and staying accessible to his employees. As chairman and CEO of automotive systems manufacturer Magna Donnelly, he makes time to hold regular Town Hall meetings at the company's various plants and factories. And each time he visits a site—which is often—he spends at least an hour out on the floor, talking "off the cuff" with employees.

And that's not all he does. He has also created two communication vehicles that employees *love*:

- **Carlos' Chatline.** In this monthly publication, Mazzorin brings employees up-to-speed on what's happening with Magna Donnelly operations around the world, explains recent product inno-

vations, and keeps employees up-to-date on any important news facing the company—internally and externally.

- **Comments to Carlos.** This is a chance for *any* employee to ask Mazzorin a question. Office workers can e-mail the questions directly to him; plant and factory workers can submit them through a submission box (the communications department forwards the contents to Mazzorin).

Unlike some CEOs, Mazzorin doesn't duck the tough questions. He handles inquiries about possible mergers, bad news, and anything else that comes in from employees and the grapevine.

And it's no surprise that employee focus groups reveal that Mazzorin gets *very* high marks for credibility, believability, and communication skills.

If you want people to embrace new ideas, then stamp out ‘dinosaur thinking’

Are your employees unwilling to break out of the mold and try new ideas? Do they always revert to the old way of doing things—even when the old way is no longer the best way? Then pay attention to this story:

Alagasco, a utility in Birmingham, Ala., had the kind of culture described above. More than 130 years of an “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it . . . and even if it’s a little broke, leave it alone” culture had destroyed employees’ willingness to try new things.

Enter Mike Warren. When he took over as president, he set about trying to change that old culture. And one of the most effective things he did was also one of the simplest.

He bought a rubber stamp in the shape of a dinosaur. And whenever he came across any piece of paper that he thought represented the old way of thinking, he would dinosaur stamp it and send it back. The message was clear: Update your thinking, or you will be extinct.

—Adapted from *1001 Ways to Energize Employees*, by Bob Nelson (Workman)

To avoid hiring a ‘blamer,’ ask this question in the job interview

Nothing kills morale faster than a “blamer.” You know the type: When something goes wrong, all they care about is pointing fingers at others as the cause of the problem and covering their own ass—making sure *everyone* knows that *they* are *not* to blame. The amount of damage a single blamer can inflict on your entire corporate culture far outweighs any benefits this individual might provide. This is why it’s important not to hire blamers in the first place.

When you interview prospective employees, ask this question: “Tell me about a time that a project you worked on failed. What happened, and what did you do about it?” Listen carefully. If you hear words like “they” and “my teammates” and “a coworker” a lot during the assessment of what went wrong, you may be dealing with a blamer. If the person spends only a short time accepting responsibility for what went wrong, and instead talks more about what she did to solve the problem, there’s a better chance she’ll be a team player.

Nobody likes to be compared to the office kiss-ass

One of the most common mistakes managers make when talking to employees is comparing one to another. Telling Harry, for instance, that he needs to be more like Dick isn’t going to make Harry a better worker. Because there’s a good chance that Harry hates Dick. And even if he *doesn’t* hate Dick, Harry doesn’t know how to be *like* Dick. Comparing one employee to another has two negative consequences: 1) It causes the employee to resent you for trying to get him to be someone he is not; and 2) It causes the employee to resent the employee you are comparing him to. If you want to foster a productive, collegial culture, encourage all employees to work to the fullest potential of their unique talents.

How to make your point in your next presentation

Question: Name two sure cures for insomnia. **Answers:** 1) An Alan Greenspan speech; and 2) Any PowerPoint presentation with more than five slides. That’s right . . . all those PowerPoint slides you so painstakingly created are putting your audience to sleep. Or, as one CEO

recently said, “Whenever the PowerPoint goes up, my eyelids go down.” Why? Because executives are swamped with PowerPoint these days. And the slides all tend to blur together after a while; the lowered lights don’t help much, either.

If you want to make an impression the next time you make a presentation, ditch the PowerPoint so your audience can focus on *your message*. You can go ahead and create the online visuals if you want; PowerPoint can be a great way to help you organize your thoughts. But instead of projecting them on the conference-room screen, make copies for everyone and distribute these *after* the meeting. Without all those charts, graphs, and bullet points to distract them (and lure them into sleep), people in the room just might pay attention to *you*.

Are you Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush?

When you talk to your employees, *you* think you’re Ronald Reagan, right? The Great Communicator! Unfortunately, employees think you’re more like George W. Bush, The Bumbling Orator. You think you’re communicating clearly; they’re confused as hell. This happens all the time in managerial communication. And, unfortunately, many employees are afraid to ask you for clarification because they don’t want to appear dense. That’s why it’s up to you to determine whether your message is getting through. One way to do it is to look at your employees’ body language. Experts say that when people are confused, they do one or more of these six things:

- Avoid eye contact
- Tilt their heads
- Squint their eyes
- Close their mouths and keep them closed
- Lower their eyebrows
- Cross their arms and legs

FOCUS

Ideas and Advice to Enhance Your Professional Influence

Perception vs. truth: The color of water

A woman who had never seen the ocean finally took a cruise. She was so enthralled with the variety of color she saw in different parts of the ocean—azure, turquoise, pine green, aquamarine, slate—that she collected samples of each hue.

When she returned home, she gathered all her friends to show them her treasures. But when she poured the samples into separate glasses in front of her guests, she was shocked and embarrassed to see they were all the same clear liquid.

For those of us who know how the qualities of light affect our perception of water, the woman's mistake is comical: She took the water's temporary local form for its true character. Yet this is the same thing that happens to all of us when we mistake our temporary perceptions of an employee's error or success, a potential sale, or a momentary setback as the truth of the situation. Like the woman, we should find out the enduring qualities—of our employees, our transactions, and our problems—before we judge them at any given moment.

—Adapted from *Instinct for Freedom: Finding Liberation through Living*, by Alan Clements (New World Library)

How to play the integrity card

You can and should express your concern for integrity by contributing to your organization's policies, training programs, and communications about the need for honesty and a sense of personal responsibility. Doing so will enlighten and reassure your employees and customers. But what you *do*—and what they witness—moment by moment will make the most difference.

In *The Integrity Advantage* (Gibbs Smith, Publisher), authors Adrian Gostick and Dana Telford describe how Greg Smith, a corporate insurance agent in Texas, once confronted one of those moments. As he filled out a new policy for a client he'd just signed, the client asked him to change the effective date

on the policy. The client wanted the policy to cover a claim that had occurred a few days earlier. By this small act of dishonesty, Smith could save his new client hundreds of dollars—a lot to the client, but really not much to the huge insurance company that backs the policy.

Smith had long prepared himself for this moment, and simply said, "Well, then when is the next time you want me to lie to you?"

Smith was content that he'd stood up for his principles, but what about the client? The client didn't receive coverage for the prior claim, but he didn't walk away from Smith, either. He stayed with him and went on to spend nearly \$1 million with Smith over the next several years on several more policies. Why not dump someone who wouldn't do even a "small" favor? Because the client had proof of Smith's integrity and knew he could trust Smith. Even at the cost of an embarrassing lesson, that knowledge is worth a lot.

Desperate for time to think? Here's one person's approach to getting it

A family took a car trip together, and each person was allowed to bring one tape to listen to on the way. Each had to be quiet during the other's tape. The daughter listened to hers, the father went next, and then it was the mother's turn.

Her choice? A blank tape that gave her 20 minutes of silence to relax and enjoy the trip. With a little planning, she'd found a way to make time to think and a quiet place to do it.

What's your strategy?

—Adapted from The Productivity PRO Web site

Order

"If communication is not your top priority, all of your other priorities are at risk."

—Bob Aronson, communications consultant

Relationship Driver

"Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships he makes with others and what happens to him in the world about him."

—Virginia Satir, therapist

How one plucky manager rallied his entire workforce around a ground-breaking innovation

Ford Motor Co. was hurting. It was the mid-1980s and once-loyal American car-buyers had become infatuated with European and Japanese models. Two decades had passed since Ford had wowed consumers with the Mustang, 70,000 of which sold in the first 30 days. It was time to shake things up again. But how? The answer: Taurus.

Rather than mapping out their vision then requiring front-line workers to implement it, Ford's engineers decided to *involve* the rank-and-file in the creative process. Enter John Risk, the manager assigned to head "Team Taurus." To get his employees to provide the necessary feedback, Risk headed for the factory floor—and climbed into a car that was making its way down the assembly line. As the car-in-progress stopped at each station, Risk introduced himself to workers and asked for their ideas on how to build a better vehicle. His journey down the line produced 1,401 suggestions, an innovative but easy-to-build car design—and a marketplace winner.

—Adapted from *The Renewal Factor: How the Best Get and Keep the Competitive Edge*, by Robert H. Waterman, Jr. (out of print), and "Ford at 100: A century of audacious tinkering," by Douglas Brinkley, in the *Detroit Free Press*

Listening

"The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said."

—Peter F. Drucker, management consultant

Class

"Genuine good taste consists in saying much in few words, in choosing among our thoughts, in having order and arrangement in what we say, and in speaking with composure."

—François Fénelon, clergyman and writer

'Say that one more time, please?'

If you think you get some strange complaints from employees, consider the plight of facilities managers in charge of the physical environment of the workplace. Each year, the International Facility Management Association compiles a list of the most "unique" requests, complaints, and comments from employees. Here are two of the more popular categories:

Killer facilities

- A set of elevators was allegedly responsible for causing an employee's computer screen to waver, making the employee seasick.
- The potpourri in a reception area was thought to give off gasses that were killing tropical fish on a lower floor.
- A green carpet was making an employee sick, he felt, and so he hired an exorcist to remove the evil spirits responsible.

Absolutely necessary privileges

- An extension cord was rejected for being the wrong color.
- An employee warned the housekeeping staff not to move his collection of Star Wars action figures when cleaning his office.
- An executive griped that he couldn't find his beer in the communal refrigerator.
- A judge wanted special sensors installed in the parking garage. The sensors would be able to detect when her car was nearing the building and trigger the elevator to come to the garage so she wouldn't have to wait for it when she arrived.

—Adapted from the International Facility Management Association Web site

Empowerment

"Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and to let him know you trust him."

—Booker T. Washington, educator

Knowledge

"Volunteer nothing, but listen to everything. If you accumulate enough gossip, it becomes information, and enough information can reveal truth."

—Robert L. Genua, in *Managing Your Mouth: An Owner's Manual for Your Most Important Business Asset*

Perception is everything

Good morning, Linda! How's it going today, Fred? As John Reddish greeted workers that morning, he couldn't help noticing everyone seemed in a sullen mood. Granted, this wasn't exactly Happy Town even on the best day. The company was financially strapped and workers hadn't gotten any merit or cost-of-living increases in two years. But that didn't explain the sudden antagonism on this particular morning.

What gives? he asked. And that's when he learned that the second-ranking executive in the company—the owner's son—had arrived that morning in a new Ferrari.

A lot of executives would have figured the Ferrari was no one else's business. But when the owner's son learned how the car was affecting workers, he quickly made an announcement that he'd been lucky enough to borrow the car while his was being repaired—and invited interested workers to drop by the parking lot at lunchtime to have a look or take a seat behind the wheel.

The black mood lifted immediately, many workers took him up on the offer—and Reddish, now head of his own consulting firm, learned a valuable lesson about perception and communication.

—Adapted from "Involve your employees in cost cutting," by Lin Gensing-Pophal, in *HR Magazine*

Viewpoint

"Whenever two people meet, there are really six people present. There is each man as he sees himself, each man as the other person sees him, and each man as he really is."

—William James, psychologist

Trust

"Trust is not a matter of technique, but of character; we are trusted because of our way of being, not because of our polished exteriors or our expertly crafted communications."

—Marsha Sinetar, author

A manager's most important words

It's tempting to think more is always better. But when it comes to words, often less is more. At the dedication of a cemetery in 1863, keynote speaker Edward Everett talked for two hours and his oration was praised on the front pages of the nation's newspapers. But history remembers the heartfelt two-minute speech that followed: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. As Everett later told the president, "I wish that I could flatter myself that I had come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes." When speaking with your employees, remember the power of brevity in the . . .

- Five most important words: *You did a great job!*
- Four most important words: *What do you think?*
- Three most important words: *I was wrong.*
- Two most important words: *Thank you.*
- One most important word: *We.*

Brevity

"The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do."

—Thomas Jefferson, U.S. president

Rewards

"Ultimately, it's not what you give your best people, but rather what you help them see and get for themselves that makes all the difference."

—Robin Silverman, professional development consultant

Why the value of a trial run should never be underestimated

No matter how reliable your product, no matter how thoroughly you've planned your presentation, you can never discount the Murphy factor: *If something can go wrong, it will*—as Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos learned the hard way.

Bezos was giving a presentation on Amazon.com's recommendation feature to an audience of about 500 people. As he explained, each time users log on to the site, they can access a list of personal recommendations for everything from books and films to toys and kitchen appliances. The system constructs the list based on each customer's purchase history.

Since a picture paints a thousand words, Bezos decided to demonstrate the feature by logging on to Amazon himself so a page bearing his personal recommendations would be projected onto a screen for all to see. He signed on, entered his password, and *voilà!* Based on his previous buying habits, the top recommendation from the DVD store popped up: *Slave Girls from Beyond Infinity*. As it turns out, the software program made the recommendation because a week earlier Bezos had purchased the campy Jane Fonda sci-fi cult classic *Barbarella*. Even so, he joked later, "It was a little embarrassing."

—Adapted from "Face time with Jeff Bezos," by Charles Fishman, in *Fast Company* magazine

Payoff

"One moment spent sharing a good word can translate into hours of high productivity."

—Hal Pitt, management consultant

Employee Development

"If you help people develop the confidence that they have marketable skills, then they can choose whether they're going to stay with your organization or leave. When they choose to stay, you get commitment. If people feel, 'I'm staying with this organization because I have no other options,' you will get compliance. But you're never going to make it to the top with compliant employees. You need their commitment."

—Carol Kinsey Goman, management consultant

Spread the word about special words

Over time, organizations gradually develop their own special terminology, abbreviations, acronyms, and jargon. For those in the know, these special words are effective ways to quickly get across complicated ideas and long phrases. But for new employees and people from outside the organization—like customers—this language can be bewildering.

Manufacturing consultant Rebecca A. Morgan of Fulcrum ConsultingWorks has several suggestions for making it more accessible to the uninitiated:

- **Create a translation tool.** Develop a glossary of the acronyms, technical terms, abbreviations, and jargon used in both your group and your organization. Make sure this glossary is distributed to participants in your orientation program so that new hires learn about company language as early as possible.
- **Push clarity in daily word use.** Train employees to spell out acronyms and abbreviations the first time they're used in a document. For example, "The RTM (reverse transfer module) is the core of our technology." This step is especially important in letters and reports that go to customers, vendors, and the general public.
- **Set an example.** Support new employees when they ask about the company terminology; don't make this an occasion for embarrassment or ridicule. In fact, it might be useful to rotate the job of updating the glossary among new employees as a convenient way to promote learning the company language.

Why not put a smile in your rejection letters?

A rejection notice doesn't have to be a slap in the face to job applicants. With a little extra effort, you can even use the turn-down process to solidify your position as an employer of choice.

Years ago when ice-cream makers Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield announced their "Yo, We Want You to Be Our CEO" contest, management consultant Jim Harris couldn't resist the temptation to apply. He didn't get the job. But as he relates in *Getting Employees to Fall in Love With Your Company* (AMACOM), what he did get was an official rejection certificate, which announced: "We almost wanted you, Jim Harris, to be our CEO" and further declared "You're just too valuable to the world to be peddling ice cream." The package also included a coupon for a free pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream and a "Call for Kids" brochure that discussed worthwhile children's agencies and encouraged applicants to volunteer in their local communities.

Says Harris, "If this is how they treat their rejected applicants, imagine how well they treat their employees!"

'Deflower' your language to spur workers to action

The next time you send a memo asking an employee to do something, skip the flowery speech and get to the point. For

instance, don't tell workers to "make an alteration" to a report, tell them to "change" it. Don't ask them to "render assistance," ask them to "help." Don't instruct them to "initiate a discussion" with a client, tell them to "talk" with the person in question. Avoid ambiguity—and stick to the action.

—Adapted from *How to Take the Fog Out of Business Writing*, by Robert Gunning and Richard A. Kallan (Dartnell)

As Yogi Berra said, 'I didn't really say everything I said'

Sometimes what you say to employees is not at all what you meant. If you're lucky, listeners let it pass; if you're not, they hold you up for global ridicule—as was the case for the following unfortunate managers whose alleged remarks were posted on the Corporate Dump Web site:

- "We know that communication is a problem, but the company is not going to discuss it with the employees." (Switching supervisor, AT&T Long Lines Division)
- "E-mail is not to be used to pass on information or data. It should be used only for company business." (Accounting manager, Electric Boat Company)
- "This project is so important, we can't let things that are more important interfere with it." (Advertising/Marketing manager, United Parcel Service)
- "Teamwork is a lot of people doing what I say." (Marketing executive, Citrix Corporation)

Use this five-step process to become your own expert proofreader

Proofreading your own documents is challenging because you're so familiar with the copy. If something is wrong, your eyes and mind usually correct it for you to allow you to continue reading. It happens so seamlessly that you're probably not even aware of it. That's why professional writers hire professional proofreaders and editors to review their work.

So how can you possibly rid your own writing of every error? By removing the pressure to catch everything on one try. Read through the document *several times*, concentrating on a different aspect of the copy on each pass:

1. Read to ensure that your meaning is clear, the sequence of your thoughts is logical, and the transitions from one section to another flow well. You might want to read it aloud on this pass to pay special attention to the rhythm of your words.
2. Read for spelling, grammar, word usage, punctuation, missing or duplicated words, and consistency.
3. Scan the document for names of people, places, and organizations, technical terms, and numbers (including times, addresses, measurements, and dates) and double-check their accuracy.
4. After making any corrections you've noted, check your new printout against the marked-up copy to make certain nothing was missed.
5. If your corrections were extensive, read the document one last time—word by word, character by character—for typos missed or perhaps caused during the correction phase.

Use ‘Guerrilla Recognition Tactics’ to recognize superior performance

Employee recognition doesn't have to be a formal process that involves expensive awards and all-company banquets. In fact, some of your best opportunities to build morale through recognition will be last-minute, “catch employees doing something right” tactics. Here are some simple things you can do that your employees will appreciate:

- **Create “Freedom Cards” that you give for superior performance.** It's entirely up to you what these cards offer employees. Basically, they're a way to say, “Thanks for the great work, now get the hell out of here and relax for a while.” But here's the catch: You don't have to give employees a week off or even a day. Maybe the card is good for only a couple of hours or a half-day. This tactic works best when the employee has just finished a difficult task or has been putting in extra hours in order to bring a project home in time.
- **Have key leaders sign a “Recognition Memo.”** One of the biggest frustrations workers experience is not knowing whether people at the top of the organization recognize their good work. That's why these Recognition Memos are so powerful. When an employee is handed an official Memo, signed by key leaders up to and including the CEO, it sends the strong message that their work is *not* being ignored.
- **Pass out “Recognition Business Cards” to employees who do something right.** Do it on the spot to reinforce the positive behavior immediately. Again, these don't have to be fancy. Just a simple business-size card with three elements:

1. A blank space to write the employee's name
2. A blank space where the manager can write down what the employee is being recognized for
3. A written note on the back reminding employees to bring their cards to their next performance review

Once again, it won't be the card itself that blows the employees away. It will be the fact that you thought enough of their work to give them the card in the first place.

—Adapted from “Just-in-time employee motivation,” from Employer-Employee.com

No time to meet with your staff? Beat the time famine with ‘sit-downs’

What's the biggest complaint most managers have when it comes to communication? That they *have no time to do it*. Supervisors who used to hold regular staff meetings are now lucky if they can periodically blast out an all-staff e-mail.

But here's a little secret: Employees are busier than ever, too. They don't necessarily *miss* those time-consuming meetings. That said, however, what employees *do* need are regular interactions with their managers. Otherwise, they'll feel out of the loop, unrecognized, and resort to manipulative measures and the grapevine to remedy the problem.

Can you spare 20 minutes a day? Of course you can. (If you truly believe you *can't* spare 20 minutes a day, quit your job; there are CEOs in charge of millions of dollars in business who seem to find time for communications. So can you.)

If you can spare just 20 minutes a day, that means you can communicate with four of your employees for five minutes each . . . *every single day*. No conference rooms, no bagels, no formal agendas—just park your rear end on somebody's desk and check in. You can accomplish a *lot* in those five minutes, too: Get project updates, answer burning questions, catch up on industry trends, hear the latest on your most important customers.

Twenty minutes a day, less than two hours a week. Not a huge commitment, is it, when you consider how much everyone can gain?

Hold your own communication audit annually

Pricey consulting firms charge companies tens of thousands of dollars to conduct “communication audits.” They come in and interview your employees to figure out where communication is breaking down in the organization. But you can do

the same thing for nothing with your team or department of employees.

Once a year, bring everybody together (if you can swing the budget, hold it off-site so that people aren't distracted by the day-to-day grind). Ask the following questions and encourage people to discuss their answers:

1. **When I communicate, do you generally understand me?** Are you clear about the directions I give?
2. **Do I favor one method of communicating**—such as e-mail—when another method would be more appropriate?
3. **If you could improve one thing** about the communication within our team, what would it be?
4. **Do you feel you have enough opportunities to offer me feedback?** Do you feel I am open to that feedback and act on it?
5. **Name at least one thing I need to improve on as a manager.**

Your goal: constructive criticism. To achieve it, you have to create an environment where employees feel comfortable talking openly about your flaws. Start the meeting with a short speech about how you want everyone to speak candidly about any problems they're experiencing. Tell them if they don't speak up with honesty, then they've forfeited their opportunity to design a better manager. Let them know in no uncertain terms that there will be no recriminations. In fact, you can even offer a “contract” that *guarantees* this—signed by both you and each employee. Once folks have that piece of paper in their hands, they'll feel a lot better about participating.

Follow this CEO's example to get in to (or stay in) the corner office

Over the years, I've seen some very successful Town Halls. And I've seen quite a few train wrecks. I've seen Town Halls where the employees left feeling energized, motivated, and enlightened. And I've seen Town Halls that had everyone scurrying to update their résumés.

What makes the difference? The people holding the microphone. The senior executives, middle managers, vice presidents, and other company leaders who run the Town Hall can make or break its success. I recently attended a series of three Town Hall meetings in one day. And based on focus groups I conducted with employees afterward, all three meetings were a smash hit.

The background: The leadership of a glass-making company was meeting with three different shifts of workers at one of its factories. Each of the meetings averaged about 150 to 200 employees.

As I sat in the meetings, I could spot what worked and what fell flat. Here is some solid advice that made these meetings score big with employees:

1. Senior leaders should introduce themselves. If you are a senior leader, introduce *yourself*. At the first meeting of the day—at 5 a.m. to catch the end of the third shift—everything was a little unorganized. As such, the plant manager didn't even introduce the CEO, who just grabbed a microphone and started talking.

For the other two meetings, people got more organized and there was a formal introduction. And those meetings got off to much slower starts than the first one. They seemed more contrived, more staged. And they weren't as effective.

2. Pick a volunteer in the audience to keep the speech on track. This CEO started out each group by saying, "I'm going to give you a brief update on the industry, a brief update on the company, and then move to what everyone wants, the Q&A. But I need a volunteer in the audience who will raise her hand if I start babbling too much."

In each case, someone *did* volunteer, and in each case, that person did raise her hand, and in each case, the CEO stopped babbling immediately and went into the Q&A. The sight of a blue-collar worker telling the CEO to can the crap and move on to the Q&A had a big effect on the audience.

3. Mix in a couple of mild swear words. You know, like "hell" or "bullshit." You won't *believe* the effect it will have on the audience. In this case, the CEO was talking about how the company needs to do more to recognize employees in ways that matter. And he acknowledged that him standing up there telling them "good job" doesn't really cut it.

"You need money," he told this group of plant workers. "You need cash. If you go to the grocery store and tell the counter clerk, 'Well,

I don't have any money but my company's CEO told me I'm doing a good job,' what is that? That is bullshit, that's what that is."

The crowd roared its approval. Now, maybe you think this only worked because it was a bunch of blue-collar workers. But white-collar people swear, too. I'm white collar, and I swear. Don't you—just every once in a while?

4. Don't feel the need to "sing off the same page." I know, it sounds stupid. But what's really stupid is when you create an "us vs. them" atmosphere in the room by having all the leaders parrot each other, even if it means ducking a question.

In this case, an employee asked: "Right now we're pulling heavy overtime on my line, working seven days a week. When is it going to end?"

The CEO kicked it over to the plant manager, who fumbled through an explanation about snowstorms slowing down the trucks and the company falling behind and blah blah blah. But he didn't answer the main question: When is it going to *stop*?

The CEO took back the microphone and, instead of endorsing the nonanswer, said this: "You sound like President Bush. No exit strategy."

The CEO then promised to get a deadline by the end of the day. And he did. By the third Town Hall meeting, the branch manager was giving a hard deadline in answer to that question.

5. Write down "assignments." The CEO was hit with some tough questions. He couldn't answer all of them on the spot. But for the ones he didn't have answers to, he would say: "That is an assignment for us. We will find that out."

And then, *at the end of the meeting*, he read his "assignment list," as he called it, and reaffirmed his commitment to getting answers. I happened to be at the meeting between the CEO and local management afterward, and he took those assignments seriously. He told the local management in no uncertain terms he wanted those questions answered.

During the meeting, all of these little things added up . . . and based on interviews I did with employees after the show, it was a huge success.

Perhaps the best thing about this advice is that it can be applied to any face-to-face communication effort—from companywide Town Halls down to your local staff meetings.

Readers: Do you have any tips for effective top-down communication?

Share them with me at steve@crescenzocommunications.com, Subject: CS

Use this three-step plan to manage multidepartment projects

It's a common scenario: Everything goes smoothly within your own department—but when you have to work with another department on a project, things fall apart. Communication breaks down, deadlines are missed, and arguments flare up everywhere. Business author Michael C. Thomsett offers managers these guidelines for working with other departments:

- 1. Sit down with the other managers.** And, says Thomsett, do this before you finalize the project schedule. Make sure everyone signs off on the schedule, so that later on, nobody can say the deadlines took them by surprise. Meeting with the managers of the other departments ensures that responsibility starts at the very top level.
- 2. Set up weekly status checks.** This doesn't have to be anything fancy, but get it onto your calendar every week. Even if it's a two-minute phone call or a weekly "project status report" via e-mail, checking in once a week can help eliminate any problems before they derail the project.
- 3. Be ready to solve unanticipated problems.** Very few projects run 100 percent smoothly. Very few departments can accurately predict their workload one month in advance. A department that has a manageable workload when the project starts could be swamped with other work midway through the schedule. Be flexible. Understand that circumstances change and be ready to come up with solutions, not blame.

And as a final piece of advice, always remember this: You're probably going to have to work with these departments again in the future. You want to build stronger bridges, not burn the ones that are already in place.

—Adapted from *The Little Black Book of Project Management*, by Michael C. Thomsett (AMACOM)

When low turnover is a bad thing

Many managers assume that having little or no turnover in their departments is a good thing. And it can be. But it can also have a negative spin that could come back to bite you. From the outside looking in, little or no turnover could be seen as a lack of opportunity to move up within the company. And if your department gets the reputation of being a "career dead zone," you will have a hard time attracting talented internal candidates to come work for you. So ask yourself this question: Is your turnover low because your employees are happy, fulfilled, and working at the level they belong at . . . or is your turnover low because you don't want to lose talented workers so you're stifling employees' opportunities to move up and out of the department? If it's the latter, you need to learn to let go. *The benefit to you:* Word will get around that you are a good manager to work for, and that you care about your employees' careers. You'll never again have any problems recruiting the best talent.

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for today's managers

Each month, Communication Solutions will deliver the best (and, sometimes, the worst) communication practices being used by managers and leaders in organizations of all types. Our goal? To provide the tools and the awareness you need to handle—in a positive way—every workplace interaction you encounter.

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Before the end of the rope is in sight, throw your staff this lifeline

We shouldn't sweat the small stuff, but on a bad day small stuff—malfunctioning equipment, quirky software—can push us over the edge. Here's how to help your staff cope. Each day, take a blank piece of lined paper, date it, and write at the top: "What Made Our Day Difficult." Then post it in a common area and encourage employees to fill the lines with examples of little things that drove them nuts. At the end of each month, review the daily "WMOOD" lists with your staff to look for recurring problems to address—or just to celebrate what you've all survived.

—Adapted from "Hire power: Nine tips for taming employee turnover," by Jim Sullivan, in *Nation's Restaurant News*

Instant messaging is here to stay, but take care how you use it

Instant messaging—or IMing, as it's commonly known—is sweeping Corporate America. Younger workers are flooding the workforce, and these kids grew up with T-1 lines snaking into their cribs; they can instant message 95 words a minute with one hand while building their own personal Web site with the other.

These workers are *accustomed* to using IMs to communicate. So you better get used to the medium, too. Or these workers may regard you as old and out of touch, and you'll get saddled with nicknames behind your back like "Mr. Mastodon" or "Mrs. Depends." (I've heard it—these kids can be cruel!)

When it comes to IMs, here's one important thing to know: It's a sucky communication tool. It's not suitable for any kind of in-depth message. It's fine for certain things, but lazily relying on it will come back to bite you.

Here's a simple rule to remember when it comes to IMing: Use it for only the shortest, simplest messages. In fact, until you get a feel for the "instant"

style, use IMs for only one thing: to see if an employee is at his or her desk and available for a face-to-face meeting or a phone call. As you become familiar with the medium, you can graduate up to asking employees simple questions. But be careful: Every time you send one, you're disrupting the receiver's workflow. IM overuse is an easy way to sap productivity.

Check the time before you criticize

It's not only *what* you say and *how* you say it that you must consider; it's also *when* you say it. You can praise an employee any time and it will always be welcome. But before you offer criticism, ask yourself: *Is this the best time?*

If an employee is up to his elbows in a complicated task or project, let him finish. If an employee is about to leave on a three-day weekend, wait until she gets back. You want the individual to accept the criticism and use it to improve performance. Yet in each of the examples cited, your input will likely become only a momentary distraction—and a lasting morale-killer. Choose a time when the employee can fully concentrate on what you have to say.

Are your employees afraid to talk to you?

When was the last time an employee gave you constructive criticism? Probably never, right? Maybe you've been thinking you're turning in a perfect performance as a manager, but here's another thought: Your employees don't speak up because they don't want to be seen as troublemakers or cry-babies. Instead, they let problems linger until morale and productivity start to slide. And if you're in the dark, you can't prevent this domino effect.

At Pillsbury, however, this isn't a problem. The food giant started an innovative communication program that is solving manager/employee conflicts *before* they get to the crisis stage.

Here's how it works:

1. The company has a "100 percent safe and secure phone line" that employees can call to provide criticism or other feedback about their direct supervisors.
2. The call goes to a third-party location that has no direct contact with the organization. Someone there writes down the feedback and then, like any other message service provider, routes the comments to the appropriate manager, without ever mentioning the employee who provided them.

The system works for everyone. Employees can offer criticism without fear of retribution. And supervisors receive feedback from the hotline that they wouldn't otherwise get—feedback they can use to improve their managerial and communication skills.

—Adapted from *Motivating & Rewarding Employees*, by Alexander Hiam (Adams Media Corporation)

When you do performance appraisals, don't waste time on stupid little things

Telling an employee that she needs to improve her interpersonal skills with coworkers is hard; telling her she needs to get back from lunch on time is easy. That's why one of the biggest traps managers fall into when it comes to evaluations is to focus too hard on the "little things"—because those are easier to handle than the big ones.

Before you conduct an official employee appraisal—or even have an informal meeting to discuss performance—list everything you want to discuss, and then *prioritize* the list, so that the most important things get covered first. Then, if you have time and if it's really important, you can straighten out all those little nitpicky things that irritate you. But if you start with a barrage of little things, by the time you get around to the hard stuff, the employee is already on the defensive—and maybe even tuning you out.