Book Report on

The Manager's Communication Handbook
(A Practical Guide to Build Understanding, Support and Acceptance)
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(Book Report by Gary Tomlinson)

"Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood."
(Jr. Teague)

An Introduction:

What is the greatest frustration for most employees? Could it be they think they're not getting paid enough? Or that the workplace is cramped or noisy? Maybe they think management expects too much from them? Could organizational bureaucracy or politics be number one on the frustration list?

All of these possibilities are easy to imagine … and justify. However, in survey after survey, employees place **communication problems** at the top of their frustration list. **Communication?** Yes, communication. Most managers spend so much time and effort communicating; it's hard for them to believe it could be a major problem. The paradox is that while employees are frustrated by a perceived lack of communication with their managers, most managers feel they are outstanding communicators. In a recent study, researchers asked a group of managers to evaluate their personal communication skills. The study discovered that 90% of the managers rated their communication skills in the top 10% of all managers. Obviously, 80% of the managers think they are better communicators than they actually are. Do you think their perceptions are a little off from reality?

"We know that communication is a problem, but the company is not going to discuss it with employees."
(Supervisor, Fortune 100 Company)

We often hear that "communication is the key" or "leadership is communication" or any number of slogans about the importance of communication. These slogans are common because they are true – communication is critical.

With so much emphasis on communication, how could it be such a big problem? The real problem is that the communication being delivered is not the same as, or connected with, the message being received. In other words, managers' communication is often filled with so much "static" that the message is not understood, supported, or accepted by employees. The static preventing connected communication could be many things including ambiguity, confusion, inconsistency, conflict, or distrust.

What causes this communication static? One factor is the proliferation of communication methods in recent years – e-mail, voice mail, meetings, conference calls, cell phones, pagers, memos, video, intranet, newsletters, etc. With so many options, we tend to pay more attention to *how* we're going to communicate than *what* we're going to communicate. In other words, it's more about the method than the message.

Another reason for the communication static is we've forgotten that true communication is a two-way process. Some of the technological advances that have made communication easier have also de-personalized it. It's not enough to just put out a message and hope employees "get it." We have to follow up to be certain we connected – to make sure the message received was the same one we intended to give.

To effectively eliminate communication static and build understanding, support, and acceptance, we need to make a shift and think of *communication as an outcome*. To do that, we want to look at communication from the receiver's perspective. We should ask the question, "What is my desired outcome with this communication? What do I want employees to think, feel, and do after receiving my message?"

At a minimum, our objective should be for others to understand our communication. But employees can clearly understand the message and still not agree with it or be willing to follow our direction. The ultimate goal is to build support and acceptance – to have receivers internalize your message, to move them to action. Understanding is intellectual; support and acceptance are emotional. It's like the difference between compliance and commitment – which one would you rather have from your coworkers?

Building Trust:

The manager's role is to communicate in a manner so that the team understands what is being said and makes a decision to accept and support the message. The simple part is getting people to understand. The tough part is getting each individual on the team to decide – on his or her own – if they believe the message and will follow the manager's direction. To make that decision, employees must trust the manager.
Trust is the core of communication. Without trust, does it really matter how charismatic you are, how you "wordsmith," or how well you speak to your team? Without trust, does it matter how great your e-mail is? Speaking and writing well are important characteristics for managers to learn; but for long-term, sustained success, leaders must have their followers' trust.

Trustworthiness is more than just a character trait that is valued in business… it is the foundation for building understanding, support, and acceptance. Lack of trust

creates a barrier to connected communication that is difficult to overcome. Once a manager loses the team's trust, he or she will constantly fight an uphill battle with all communication efforts. The reality is, people quit people before they quit companies.

Manager's must earn their employees' trust and constantly re-earn it. The harsh reality is that it takes years to develop trust within an organization, yet it can be lost in minutes because of one mistake. Managers must guard the trust they have earned as if it is their most precious management possession … because it is.

What can managers do to build trust so that employees will be more inclined to accept and support their leadership? There are three critical behaviors managers can adopt to eliminate the static that destroys trust:

1. **Communicate – and consistently reinforce –the acceptable standards of behavior for your team.**

   People become confused when there are no established performance standards, when the rules are contradictory, when the stated objectives are not being followed or when the goals are constantly changing.

   For instance, we may communicate that we respect employees' time, yet we consistently begin our meetings fifteen minutes late – wasting fifteen minutes of everyone's time. Perhaps we say employees are our most valuable assets, but we hire the first "warm body" we can find to be on the team. Or maybe we tell people that we value excellence, yet ask more and more from our top performers, while tolerating mediocrity and poor performance from others.

   Earning employees trust begins with clearly establishing acceptable standards of behavior for the team. To do that, mangers must first answer the question, "What are the team's values?" Then they can determine the "rules of the road" and decide which behaviors are "non-negotiable." If the standards are not clearly established, are continually changing, or are contradictory, you cannot expect to develop personal trust. After all, what would they be trusting?

   When people understand the rules of the game, generally speaking, they will do their best to play by the rules.

2. **When in the "gray zone," choose employee fairness.**

   Management often involves making decisions about situations where things are not exactly black or white. For example, if a nurse has two IV starts scheduled for 2:00 pm and the employee must make a decision about who to see first, there may be no obvious right or

wrong answer. There is also a chance we will have a less-than-perfect outcome with one of the patients. This will have to be handled with great customer service. However, let the employee know you understand their predicament and support their decision of who they saw at 2:00 pm, assuming there was a thought process behind it.

Most people do not look at events as isolated incidents. Employees evaluate a manager's decisions regarding others as if they were personally involved and make the assumptions the manager will treat them the same way. If they perceive the manager was fair and reasonable, they will assume the manager will be fair and reasonable with them. But the opposite is also true.

When faced with a situation in the gray zone, err on the side of employee fairness. You earn trust when employees perceive you will be fair when there is no obvious right or wrong.

3. **Live up to your commitments:**

   Every day, the ultimate test of trust is given. Your word – your commitment – is judged every time you say you're going to do something, regardless of how insignificant it may be. Even the smallest commitment is a representation of your integrity.

   Your team grades the trust test when they evaluate whether or not you did what you said you would do. For instance, suppose you show up late for a meeting with your team because your supervisor called you at the last minute. You can easily convince yourself you have a good reason for being late… and you may be right. You can justify your action based on your good intention. Your intention was to be on time, and you would have been if not for the emergency call. Unless you clearly explain the circumstances, people at the meeting will see your tardiness as an inconsiderate action. In most cases, they could have been doing something more productive than waiting on you.

   If your team has to make a choice to trust you based on what you say or what you do…what you do will "win" every time.
   Building understanding, support, and acceptance begins with earning trust. When employees clearly understand the standards of behavior, perceive they will be treated fairly, and see that managers live up to their commitments – then you will connect with them and get the results you want.

Sharing Knowledge:

Without a doubt, one of the best investments of a manager's time is teaching the team "the business of the business." People have a basic need to understand what is required of them and how their contributions make a difference. In other words, people need to see how they fit into the big picture.

Sharing knowledge and teaching employees the business of the business is key to building understanding. The more information managers share about the "why" behind the "what" they are trying to accomplish, the more employees will see the overall organizational vision, and the more they will accept and support the plans and strategies necessary to achieve that vision.

So what can you do to increase team members' knowledge? There are three essential steps: show your team members how the pieces fit together; demonstrate how employees at all levels make a difference for the customer; and teach team members the vital signs of the business.

1. **Show the team how all the pieces of the picture fit together.**

   Typically, most team members know the majority of what goes on within their business units. However, most team members know to little about the rest of the organization and how all the pieces come together.

   If managers can tear down the walls between departments and show their teams the contributions each department makes to the organization, groups will begin to support each other.

2. **Demonstrate how the team makes a difference to the customer.**

   If employees know little about other departments, they often know even less about the customer. Managers must help them understand who the customers are and what each of them need from us.

3. **Teach employees the vital signs of the business.**

   Although they may not ask, employees really do want to know what all those reports and numbers mean. Managers who invest the time to teach their employees the critical numbers of the business will reap the rewards of greater understanding and increased productivity. Remember – knowledge shared is power multiplied.

The critical numbers are the primary link to understanding the big picture; yet many managers want to share them only on a "need to know" basis or want to hide them from co-workers altogether. But keeping this "intelligence" solely at the management level doesn't make sense. You can't multiply power until the knowledge is shared.

Start with the basics. The key indicator reports, profit and loss statements, cost and profitability analysis, etc. are more than digits on paper – they are the business gauges that communicate results and determine success. They indicate how well the business is doing; identify areas that need improvement; and allow employees to see how their day-to-day activities affect the company and its customers.

Sharing knowledge is the basis for building understanding – the foundation to co-worker acceptance and support. It changes the way people perceive their work. They see exactly where they fit in and why they are important. The better you communicate "what" along with "why," the more effective your team will be at accomplishing your objectives.

Peter Drucker has said everyone in an organization should know the answers to these two questions: *"What is our business?"* and *"How is business?"* That's pretty good advice.

Providing Feedback:

"We have communication briefings, team meetings, performance reviews, e-mails, voice mails, memos and every other form of communication. I just don't understand why the employees don't do what they're suppose to do."
(A frustrated Manager)

"I don't know what management wants. It seems to be a moving target."
(An even more frustrated Employee)

Sound familiar? Maybe the employee is right… things do continually change. Change is a constant and natural event that, unfortunately, creates communication static. Effective management means accepting the fact that we have changing business conditions (a.k.a. moving targets) and creating a feedback system to keep the targets in the cross hairs.

Every person in an organization has four basic feedback needs. A good feedback system encourages connected communication between managers and co-workers by addressing these needs:

1. **Employees need to know exactly what is required of them.**

   Managers often think that understanding what to do is not a problem for their employees. They spend a lot of time giving performance feedback, communicating priorities, and making sure the team understands exactly what to do. In fact, some managers think they over communicate goals and objectives.

   And yet, ambiguity about job requirements and expectations is a major source of stress for most employees. Although managers may communicate often, the messages employees receive may be inconsistent or even contradictory.

   For instance, a scheduler may have two patients or deliveries they have not staffed along with a co-worker who is upset and asking to talk with them. "Do they take the time to talk with and comfort the employee so that employee can continue being productive or does the scheduler get the pending visits covered?"

   There are many good employees who appear to have poor performance because of contradictory performance expectations. An employee could make a good decision (taking care of an internal customer) and yet be penalized (for not getting a visit staffed timely). And we wonder why employees are confused.

   Confusion shared is confusion multiplied. It's the manager's responsibility to clearly identify what is required – in priority order – to eliminate the stress and confusion created by seemingly contradictory objectives.

   One of the greatest challenges of management is to sort through what is not important, eliminate the clutter, and keep the team focused on one or two key activities. Managers who "keep the main thing the main thing" and focus on a few vital functions, ensure not only their own success, but also the success of the team.

2. **Employees need to know "How am I doing?"**

   One way to answer this question is with formal performance reviews. But it's not enough to only answer the question once or twice a year. Employees need to know more frequently – how they're doing from the manger's perspective.
   Performance reviews are great for documenting performance and creating a structured opportunity for the manager and employee to sit down and talk about how things are going. But performance reviews rarely produce long-term behavior change. In general, performance-review

improvements don't last until the next performance review. Long-term behavioral change occurs only if the manager, like any effective coach, consistently reinforces the behaviors required to be successful.

It's human nature for employees to want to be encouraged and to know how the manager perceives their performance. The most effective encouragement is positive feedback – it's also the best way to reinforce desired behavior. Here are some guidelines for giving positive feedback:

a. **Be sincere.** Giving positive feedback can backfire if it's not perceived as genuine.
b. **Be quick.** The sooner you give feedback after the behavior you're trying to reinforce, the better your results will be.
c. **Give feedback often.** A good "rule of thumb" is to do it twice as often as you think you should, and you'll have a good chance of meeting your employees' needs.

3. **Employees need to know their manager cares about them and the job they are doing.**

It's not uncommon to hear in an organization's hallways, "Nobody around here gives a %@!*. I'm working my tail off, and it doesn't seem to matter."

Whether or not managers consciously answer it, the question "Does anyone care?" is always being answered. It is a manager's action – compassion and caring for employees, their sacrifices, and their contributions – that determine how the question will be answered.

The most effective way for managers to show employees they care is to invest their time. And the more time a manager invests, the greater the return. Here are ten ways to invest in your employees.

1. Schedule dedicated time to focus on employee development.

2. Occasionally ask co-workers about interests outside of work.

3. Treat everyone with respect and dignity.

4. Say "thank you."

5. Get employees involved and ask for their opinion.
6. Remember birthdays and service anniversaries.

7. Support employees in times of crises.

8. Be available when people need you.

9. Help co-workers become more effective.

10. Surround good people with other good people.

Employees want to know that managers recognize their contributions, and they want to hear it in person. Technology has been a great productivity enhancement for many aspects of management, but it can be a detriment to maintaining personal contact with team members. Managers can't depend on technology to broadcast the message that they care, because you can't develop trust electronically.

A handshake and a look in the eyes to say "thank you" have a far greater impact than any message on a computer screen. It may sound strange, but the more you use technology in your communications, the more face-to-face contact you need to have with your co-workers.

In most cases, when managers actively demonstrate they care for employees and show appreciation for their contributions, employees will go above and beyond the requirements to do the job well.

4. Employees need to know how the team is doing.

People want to be part of a winning team and know their contributions make a difference. Establishing work unit goals and expectations, while providing feedback on the team's progress, is essential to effective management. The more emphasis you place on teamwork, the more accountability team members will feel and the more collaboration will occur.

As with individual feedback, team feedback should be sincere, quick, and frequent. Keep your team informed about how well they're doing and whether or not they're winning. And, if they're not performing as expected, let them know what they need to do to achieve the desired results.

Picture these four feedback needs as a wheel where each requirement is one fourth of that wheel: what is required, how am I doing, know that my manager cares, and how the team is doing. If any of the four pieces of the wheel are missing, you may eventually get to where you want to go; but it will be a rough ride and take a lot longer!

Each piece of the feedback wheel is important and necessary for your management success. If you meet all four feedback needs, your team will ask you

an important question "What can we do to help?" When they do, you know you've gained their understanding, support, and acceptance.

Walking the Talk:

Why have a section on walking the talk in a communications manual? A recent survey revealed that only 14% of employees said they had a positive role model at work. That means 86% of those surveyed couldn't identify even one person at work they want to emulate.

Think about it … the principal method of communication in most organizations (whether we realize it or not) is the observation of other people's behavior. Your example communicates who you are and what you believe far more clearly than any speech you deliver, memo you write, or e-mail you send. Fair or not, people judge us on our actions, regardless of our good intentions … we have to walk our talk.

When you chose to become a team leader, supervisor, manager, or director, you assumed a tremendous responsibility. People follow people – and as the manager, they are following you. Your employees have entrusted a large part of their lives to you. Everything you do and say is being watched and evaluated. The question is, "What are they seeing?"

Here are two consistent truths about management: *You are always leading and everything you do counts.*

As the manager, your influence is constant. You lead by what you do, so you're leading all the time – even when you don't realize it. The fact is, if you're a leader, you work in a "fish bowl." You don't get to pick and choose what attitudes or behaviors you want to count – everything counts!

For instance, suppose you just had a stressful meeting with your supervisor, and you're tasked with resubmitting your budget – not great news. As you leave the meeting and walk toward your office, one of your best employees passes you in the hall. You don't even see the employee, much less acknowledge them – after all, you have a lot on your mind.

But the employee perceives that you ignored him – you wouldn't even speak or acknowledge his presence. He goes home and tells his spouse he's worried about his job. He explains that you went to an important meeting with the boss and when you returned, you couldn't even look at him. Something must be up.

While you're lying in bed that night worrying about your budget, one of your best employees is lying awake worrying about his JOB! Remember – you're always leading and everything counts.

Whether you like it or not, the example you set has an effect on your team and all the people they effect. It's your responsibility to use your influence to lead others in the direction they should be going. *You can never, not lead!*

Sometimes managers forget that "everything counts."

The Enemies of Leading by Example:

Haziness – Acting, and reacting, without thinking.

Greed – The drive to acquire or possess more and more in one's self-interest.

Speed – The motivation to cut corners in response to the "warp speed" of business.

Laziness – Taking the path of least effort and resistance.

Building understanding, support, and acceptance requires walking the talk on a personal level. But it also requires living up to your organization's values and operating principles. If you want to build understanding, support, and acceptance, your values and operating principles must not only be believed … they must be behaved.

A Final Thought:

A manager can (and often does) make or break an organization. Most of the time the determining factor of a manger's success or failure is not the strategy, it's the tactics … how well the strategy was communicated and executed. Many great plans have failed because of communication breakdowns within organizations.

We've shared with you the four critical dimensions of communication that are so obvious, yet so often overlooked:

Build Trust – The core of communication is developing trust.

1. Clearly establishing acceptable standards of behavior eliminates confusion.
2. Err on the side of employee fairness when there is no obvious right or wrong.
3. Pass the trust test by living up to your commitments.

Share Knowledge – Knowledge is power. Equip your team with as much knowledge as you can.

1. Show the team how all the pieces of the picture fit together.
2. Demonstrate how the team makes a difference to the customer.
3. Teach employees the vital signs and the business of the business.

Provide Feedback – People need to know where they stand.

1. Let employees know what is required of them.
2. Tell them how they're doing.
3. Show them that you care.
4. Tell them how they're doing as a team.

Walk the Talk – We have to walk our talk personally and professionally.

1. People watch everything you do.
2. You are always leading.
3. Everything counts.

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The WALK THE TALK$^{\circledR}$ Company helps individuals acquire the skills and confidence they need to be effective leaders … and organizations develop cultures built on Ethics, Values, and Superior Performance. They offer a full range of proven resources and customized services all designed to help you turn shared values like Integrity, Respect, Responsibility, Customer Service, Trust, and Commitment into workplace realities.

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