



The
**SILENT
TREATMENT**



**HOW TO BRIDGE A COMMUNICATION GAP
BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR EMPLOYEES**

IN ANY COMPANY, COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MANAGERS and employees is a big issue. Employees want guidelines from their supervisors and management staff wants input from its team. And while most companies have little trouble filtering information down the layers, they do have challenges when it comes to filtering information up. That's because too many employees stay quiet about what they need, resulting in missed opportunities, delayed projects and failed initiatives.

By Linda Keefe

THE REASONS FOR SUCH A COMMUNICATION GAP ARE NUMEROUS, RANGING FROM THE EMPLOYEES' THINKING: "I DON'T WANT TO APPEAR INCOMPETENT" TO "WHO AM I TO OFFER IDEAS TO MANAGEMENT?" ADDITIONALLY, BECAUSE THEY KNOW THAT THE MANAGEMENT TEAM IS BUSY WITH LONG-TERM PLANNING AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, MANY EMPLOYEES DON'T WANT TO INTERRUPT WITH DETAILS OF THE DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES. HOWEVER, WITHOUT THAT KNOWLEDGE, MANAGERS HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME GAUGING WHETHER THEY'RE LEADING THE COMPANY EFFECTIVELY.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to get your employees to communicate better and to keep the company's progress on track. The key is to build a quality interaction between the employee group and the management team. When you break through the barriers and get employees and managers working together, you help everyone understand the tremendous effort it takes to advance the company's strategic vision and attain goals. Without support from every member in the group, your company's progress suffers and ultimately reduces long-term profits.

To instill confidence in your employees and encourage them to contribute, apply the four elements of SharedKnowledge—a process that can transform your entire organization into one that works with and for each other, not against one another. This unique combination of elements includes organizational communication, skills, motivation and empowerment. Below are ways to use these four vital components to get your employees to communicate their needs so they can help the company grow and prosper.

1. COMMUNICATE NEEDS

Communication is a two-way process and a shared responsibility. Employees have just as much responsibility for speaking up, for setting expectations and requirements and for communicating barriers and opportunities as does the management team. When you encourage your employees to communicate with the senior team, you're helping each group understand the other's job duties and what each reasonably can and cannot do given the budget and expectations.

Ask your employees to speak up and proactively tell the management team what they are struggling with and what managers can do to help. Reinforce the company's vision and state how the current objectives contribute to it. Then explain that you need the employees' input to make attaining the vision a reality. After all, if your organization wants to produce results that leave your customers and company

shareholders wowed, you have to know your responsibilities and what it will take to reach everyone's objectives.

2. SHARE INDUSTRY SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

While most people are knowledgeable about and skilled in their particular job duties, many managers are unaware of their employees' daily activities. Encourage your employees to educate you about their job specifics. Ask them to explain what goes into each successful project by listing all the actions and costs, including time costs.

Make it a proactive dialog where you and your employees discuss which ideas and actions have worked in the past. Go over survey results, client satisfaction ratings, safety metrics or any other factual data that would begin a discussion. Ask questions to get your employees to offer suggestions about the present situation. For example, you may say, "Last year we increased sales by 35 percent and we had a 15 percent increase in marketing resources. With only a 10 percent increase in marketing resources this year and a 5 percent staff reduction, what kind of results do you anticipate we'll get and what resources will you need to overcome any hurdles?"

As you listen to the feedback, offer trade-offs, such as: "If we allocate more marketing funds, can you increase sales by another 5 percent?" This will enable employees to see the impact on the bottom line and will prompt them to get involved in the decision process.

3. CREATE A MOTIVATION CYCLE

Your input plays a big part in motivating employees to communicate with you and reach goals. Make communicating with management easy. Some suggestions to consider include:

- Arranging a group conference call so employees can share their ideas about a particular project or strategic plan.

- Sending employees a personal thank you note for a job well done, complete with the management team's signatures.
- Setting a half day aside to conduct round table discussions with employees to address their concerns.
- Offering short, 10-minute one-on-one sessions between managers and employees to discuss employee issues.



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- Having senior management sit with the employees during breaks or at lunch to discuss company issues.

When the employees see you and other managers taking an interest in their responsibilities, they'll be excited to complete their tasks to the best of their ability. Additionally, the senior team's interest will show that each employee's contribution is integral to the company's strategic initiative. Employees will actively seek out new and creative ideas to advance the organization and

will share those ideas with you. The result will be a greater increase on the company's bottom line.

4. ESTABLISH EMPOWERMENT EXPECTATIONS

Empowerment is about setting the expectations. You and your team need to have a common understanding documented. Like Ken Blanchard's *One Minute Manager*, write a one-minute goal and the requirements in 400 words or less (half a page). For example, you may say, "We want to increase our sales this year by 50 percent. In order to accomplish this, the team needs a \$___ marketing budget, a monthly sales meeting with all employees and managers and an increase in staff by ___ percent."

Discuss the goals and parameters with everyone involved before you begin delegating tasks so that as a team you can make the needed tradeoffs to ensure a successful outcome. When everyone knows the specifics of what's required, you are empowered to create the desired results. Always remember that the entire interaction hinges upon communication, and the quality of the communication determines how empowered you and your team are.

RESULTS NOW

If you want to encourage your employees to communicate openly, you need to show why open communication from both sides is so vital to the company's success. Make it a shared responsibility for everyone to educate each other, express what they need, and show how specific duties affect the bottom

line. When you get everyone actively involved in the communication process, the more efficient your team will operate and the greater success you will all attain. ■

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