

Getting The Boss To Listen

BY JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI, APR, FELLOW PRSA

All too common refrain from our profession is that bosses don't listen. When I ask senior executives why they will do something on the advice of an outside consultant but ignore the same advice repeatedly given by someone in-house, their response often is, "My communications people don't have a management perspective." Like it or not, this is a valuable insight for practitioners who wish to be management counselors, coaches and strategists.

The price of credible admission to the inner circle is a management perspective that drives your attitudes, actions and advice. Developing a management perspective means essentially four things:

- Putting yourself in the manager's

shoes operationally and nonoperationally.

- Asking different kinds of questions before those you normally raise.
- Providing sound managerial reasons for communicating or not communicating.
- Avoiding many of the usual progress arguments that have no credibility with management, make little sense from an operating perspective and are virtually irrelevant anyway.

Putting yourself in the manager's shoes means evaluating and assessing crises in a business context first. Approach problems from a management point of view. Use the SWOOT technique. Evaluate: strength, weakness, opportunities, options and threats. Develop options for addressing the situation that take into account the factors that most concern managers.

Reporter and media attitudes rarely dominate management problems initially. Ask managerially relevant questions first:

- How does the current situation affect strategy?
- Are management mistakes changing the strategy the executives laid out?
- Can we gain employee commitment to the changing circumstances that are causing the problem we're now facing?
- What strategies are available to us to keep shareholder interest aligned with our goals?
- Can management make the tough decisions and act quickly enough to turn the problem situation into an opportunity, or at least into a mitigative circumstance?
- What resources can management allocate to deal with the issue at hand or to resolve matters in ways that move us toward our strategy?
- What have peer companies, in similar circumstances, done?
- How will the present circumstance affect our ability to research and develop new products, services and ideas?

James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA, is chairman of The Lukaszewski Group.





C U T L E R

- Is this a situation that requires adaptation or dramatic shifts and changes?
- What nonfinancial factors are of greatest concern? What about the direct financial factors?
- Will customer satisfaction be adversely affected?
- What are the compliance implications of the current situation and what remedial steps will be necessary? Talk of risk/threat reduction and

prevention needs to be quantified in terms of future damage control, or limitation of current collateral damage. Make it measurable, and you'll get more attention. Avoid the usual approaches:

- Trying to explain how the media work or reporters' top concerns.
- Explaining why we have to give reporters something special or more than we share with our own employees.
- Trying to write the news release

in the first 10 minutes of your encounter with the senior management team.

Strive to tell executives something they don't already know. Once you're able to consistently provide a management perspective to communication, management meetings of any consequence in your organization will wait until you arrive. ■

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