

Work With Me

With Low Trust Levels in Senior Management,
You Need to Become an Employee Communications Strategist

BY JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI, APR, FELLOW PRSA

The world of today's workers gets wackier by the week. We ask—no, we demand—that they improve productivity and rededicate themselves to our mission, vision and values on a daily basis. At the same time we tell them, “You are employed at will.” “You have no right to your job.” The employee manual says, “Nothing in this publication should be construed to be a contract of employment between worker and employer.”

Our parents got a job and stayed there. We have no guarantee of a job beyond today, nor can we count on the company being around for any defined length of time.

“Who are they? Who are those people who come to work here every day? What are they about? Why can't we communicate with them? Why won't they listen? Why won't they just do what they're told to do?” — the lament of countless frustrated managers.



clann tardif/CORBIS

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Getting through to workers to influence their behavior, attitudes and work habits is one of the most frustrating aspects of organizational management. How can senior executives, supervisors and managers generate enough loyalty, motivation and focus to move the organization forward each day despite rumors, uncertainty, “failed opportunities,” abrupt shifts in direction, obvious mistakes in decision-making and the daily sense that there really is no one in charge, and no plan or strategy in place to meet future contingencies. Trust in senior management is at the lowest level in years.

The greatest continuing area of weakness in management practice and communication is the human dimension. In good times or bad, there seems to be little real understanding between managers and employees.

When there are problems, everyone acknowledges that the cause is often communications failure. Maybe it's time to take a new look at the employee/employer relationship.

Enter the management communications strategist, whose objective is to rethink, refocus and then restructure the goals and objectives of this critical part of effective organizational management. Here's how it might work.

Rethink the organizational mix

Let's describe who comes to work each day in terms of actual behavior and analyze how these behaviors help or inhibit communication. Then let's find insightful ways to draw management's attention to how it can achieve success by reassessing the work force it has at its disposal and looking at the business from a more employee-driven perspective. After all, organizations are run by the people who show up for work every day.

Using employee behavior, any organization of 35 or more can redivide its employees into six behavior categories:

- Those who Work to Live (WTL), 50 percent.
- Those who are Disengaged, but still Work to Live (DWTL), 19 percent.
- Those who Live to Work (LTW), 15 percent.
- Those who are Dysfunctional, but still Live to Work (DLTW), 7 percent.
- Self-Appointed in or Near the Top (SAINTT), 4 percent.
- The Disheartened, Disgruntled, Disoriented, Unconvinced Victims (DDDUV), 25 percent.

Yes, you may recognize that there is a mathematical anomaly here, but remember that this is a strategic exercise. Our analysis of these categories will resolve this question. Let's take a closer look at each category.

The Work to Live (WTL) employee

Those who work to live comprise the largest portion — often half or more — of the work force. These are the folks who genuinely make the organization successful. That's because no matter what, they come to work on time, get it done, pretty much follow directions and do what is asked of them — provided they understand it and can go home on time.

They ask for little in return, but don't ask them to join company parties, for great outbursts of loyalty, or try to mandate their involvement. When such opportunities arise, some of these employees may take part, but it will be on their terms, at their discretion and in their own time. These individuals have a life outside the plant gate or the office entrance, and this is where they prefer to be.

Work is their mechanism for having a life. That's why it's hard for management to appreciate or respect these employees' true motivations. Actually, they have only one — to leave work to get back to their real lives.

The Disengaged Work to Live (DWTL) employee

There are a significant number of employees who have work-related problems beyond their control that prevent them from functioning effectively. But they show up on time every day and remain ready to work once the problem has been resolved. They'd like to be Work to Live people.

Message reception capability is zero. They are intellectually deaf until work or work-life problems are resolved.

The Live to Work (LTW) employee

Undoubtedly, those who are reading this analysis are among those who live to work — the folks who come early, stay late, read and write the memos, and try to move the organization forward. LTWs are on the program, work hard to understand what the boss and management are looking for and try to make it happen every day of the week. They usually resent anyone who goes home on time.

Message reception capability is 1:7.

The greatest continuing area of weakness in management practice and communication is the human dimension.

The Dysfunctional Live to Work (DLTW) employee

They spend a lot of time in the office, but are generally busy making mistakes the WTLs must fix daily. They are managers or leaders who muck things up, making more work for others.

Message reception capability is unknown. They are on a different mission altogether.

The Self-Appointed in or Near the Top (SAINTT) employee

SAINTTs make up about 4 percent of the entire organization. These are the official interpreters of the word. They watch, count and interpret what important people are doing and saying. If you have a question, you go to the SAINTTs — not to the boss or another employee who may have the answer.

Message reception capability is zero. They lie or make up information based on what they think they observe.

The Disheartened, Disgruntled, Disoriented, Unconvinced Victim (DDDUV — pronounced “Dove”)

Perhaps 25 percent of the work force, these people bring powerful, negative energy to every situation. They assure the failure of most positive ideas and concepts put forward by management or by others trying to be helpful. New ideas or concepts are jibber-jabbered to death with: “We tried that a couple of years ago, and it failed.” “That’s not our style.” “It will never work here — employees won’t buy it.” “Our investors don’t like this kind of thing.” “The boss will never go for it.” “It’s not a very smart way to go.” “It won’t work in our culture.” “I’ll work against it.” “Go ahead and try to make it work.” Doves seem positive publicly but are relentlessly negative in private.

Message reception capability is zero. They are intellectually deaf. They only receive every 12th word. They’re deaf because they’re victims. Victims act and re-enact their pain and victimization 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Why do the numbers add up to more than 100 percent? Even though my ratios add up to 120 percent of the employee base, this analysis works because the Doves’ victim mentality is working around-the-clock. They’re powerful at stopping or choking off progress. Every Dove is worth two of any other category because they function (or dysfunction) around the clock. This is the reason Doves are so powerful in an organization.

Communication Reality No. 1

Overcoming Organizational and Intellectual Deafness Is a Prerequisite to Effective Action.

The value of this new perspective is how it helps us better understand why organizations have so much trouble getting things done. Each employee group has a limited ability to hear what management is saying. In good times, each functional group has a hearing efficiency of only 1:3, meaning they get every third word. Even those who work to live don’t hear messages correctly the first time. This is why management’s relentless quest for efficiency and effectiveness never hits the mark and why demands to “get it right on the first try” can virtually never be met. Even lifesaving messages have to be repeated.

When trouble is in the air, when change is on the horizon or coming into an organization, hearing efficiency is reduced to about every fifth or seventh word. Change creates fear, uncertainty and doubt. When these are present, the listening efficiency drops to 1:12 or worse. People who feel like victims are no longer receptive to facts. They can be moved only by what appeals to their emotional state. Their ability to hear facts or useful information that does not conform to their emotional state is practically zero.

Communication Reality No. 2

The Most Important Employees, Those Who Work to Live, Require Recognition, Acknowledgement and Very Little Else. (Don’t Block the Gate at Quitting Time.)

For communication to occur, there must be someone on the correct frequency with his or her receiver turned on. For the WTL employees, it means answering three nagging questions they have about their work:

- Does anyone know I’m here?
- Am I doing something important?
- Am I making a difference?

This is the group management wants to keep comfortable, peaceful and healed. These people run the business. They make ideas work. When management withholds information or is negative or accusatory of the Doves, the WTLs become uncomfortable and begin to worry. The WTLs go to the Doves for information because management ignores the Doves.

Doves generally have only one major constituency: the WTLs. When the WTLs ask the Doves any question, there is only one response — “It’s worse than you can possibly imagine!”

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

When periods of uncertainty arise, the Doves can combine with some or all of the WTLs. That means that three-quarters of the employee base can be in turmoil and not be ready to move forward in positive ways. These are optimal conditions for organizing activity, high turnover, increases in workplace accidents and quality problems.

Communication Reality No. 3

Prompt Communication Can Overcome Lack of Facts and a Poor Strategy.

Functional employees require little information to stay focused on their jobs, but they need that information promptly. They need answers to the questions the Doves constantly raise.

Increasingly we're recommending, for example, that even in good times company management meetings be held using teleconferences at least once a month. When problems occur, we increase the frequency to two-to-four times per month. Modern technology allows hundreds, sometimes thousands of people to attend these telemeetings. Just being included is a form of acknowledgement and recognition, which is important to WTL employees at every level. Small amounts of useful information can neutralize negative energy and allow the WTLs to go home feeling OK.

Communication Reality No. 4

The Only Effective Local Conduit for Communication With Employees Is Through a Source the Recipients Respect and Recognize — Their Supervisor.

We reconfirm a well-recognized but still poorly executed axiom: The immediate supervisor is the workers' information source of choice — the most trusted, the most important and the most powerful communication resource for individual employees — whether those employees are functional or dysfunctional.

The PR practitioner's knowledge of the entire environment of the organization should drive the coaching, teaching and development of supervisory communication skills. It may be useful to consider installing two functional supervisors within each working group in the organization — one who shares how the work is to be done and the other who helps workers understand what's going on in the business. The latter person would collect information and worker questions to make sure there is adequate feedback from within the organization so questions are answered promptly.

Who does the employee trust for information?

CEO	5 percent
Top management	6 percent
Middle management	10 percent
First-line supervisor	30 percent
TPNTM*	15 percent
Themselves	24 percent
Discount on general principle	10 percent
	100 percent

* The Person Next to Me

This is an understandable pattern, since most employees don't know the CEO or top management. They only know their immediate supervisor. While they may want to hear the CEO and top management speak, they'll believe their first-line supervisor and people closer to them. Note that employees make almost one out of every three decisions by themselves or with their neighbor's help.

Become an employee communications strategist

Employee communications strategies involve helping managers master the human dimension and finding new ways to understand how employees approach their work. Remember, the critical roles of the strategist are to :

- Think aggressively
- Challenge assumptions
- Question cherished patterns
- Strive to master the human dimension
- Recommend useful, doable options
- Anticipate the unintended consequences of strategic action

Employees want three things: to become a WTL, to have questions answered by their supervisor and to work for an honorable organization they can talk about with their families and friends. ■



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