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THE POLITICS OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS

Building Community Consent

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For an organization to succeed, each day, at least 51 percent of those who matter have to be pulling in the same direction. That requires leadership from the top, every day, to show the way and to help forecast and overcome the new barriers that arise and the old barriers that persist. This is a tall order in many organizations.

Some leaders are good communicators, some are non-communicators. Some leaders are good delegators, some are autocrats. Some leaders are bureaucrats, some are activists, and some are charismatic. The reality is that organizations will be successful in the context of their current leaders and leadership.

The lesson for every leader is that success is more likely when simple, sensible, constructive efforts are undertaken to build and maintain a base within the most important audience most leaders have, their employees and others whose lives are directly affected by their organizational relationship.

The question is, of course, how can management accomplish its goals while allowing undisciplined, often chaotic communication strategies? Answer: With great difficulty, if at all.

A business organization is very similar to a political body, so we begin with a political strategy—to win in any environment, those seeking to advance, lead, or achieve must have a base of winning-minded collaborators and followers to get the job done and establish the momentum to tackle the next challenge. The political exercise is one of simplification rather than complexity. Effective communication is an exercise in process-driven execution.

We begin the process of base building using the Ridgeway Audience Issue Analysis* model. Communication success is dependent almost solely on the base audience's level of interest in participating, or not, in a given situation. Figure One is the fundamental tool for carrying out this analysis. Here is the key: an issue generally has two types of audiences—the Base Audience and Special Publics. The Base Audience consists of those who have an ongoing, voluntary or involuntary interest or connection to the issue or circumstance. Usually the connection is a paycheck, some overwhelming benefit, or a threat that needs to be constrained.

The second audience component is the Special Publics grouping. Special Publics are individuals, organizations, or entities that have a relationship with the sponsoring organization based on the individual agendas of each Special Public, sometimes in opposition to the agenda, issues, or questions of the Base Audience. In this template, the small circles on the left represent a wide variety of organizational types and groups that are connected to the issue or organization by their private agendas.

In the Base Audience section, you see, by the construction of the model, that the ideas and concepts to drive the issue or the organization forward begin in the center with Leaders. Communication moves out systematically to Top Management, then to Upper Management, then to Middle Management, then to First-line Supervisors, then to Employees, then to Employee Families, and then to the Community as a whole. There may be some other some groups (such as retirees, crucial customers or clients, sympathetic public policy makers, or any discrete group with collateral interests who make up the remainder of the Base Audience).

Perfecting the ability to systematically communicate with these groups and maintain a relationship is where most corporate and organizational initiatives fail. The process requires discipline, constant analysis, feedback, and action taken immediately or preemptively, as required. Base Audience success is almost always dependent on the First-Line Supervisor. Special Publics pay attention, on their own, talk to Top Management directly, but also (and often) throughout the Base Audience as well.

Note the arrows moving out from the Leader. This is a reminder that, to really benefit from this process, leadership must enforce the process of cascading communication from the top of the organization all the way out until the public or target audiences are reached, if that is the goal. The crucial insight of this model is that failure to energize the base and capitalize on what often are hundreds and, potentially, thousands of communicators is the chief cause of defeat, delay, or base confusion.

Also note the arrows going into the Base Audience circles, from the outer most ring to the inner most ring. Failure to systematically cascade information outward destroys the opportunity to have a continuous flow of incoming information, intelligence, and responses from the communities of interest that each of these Base Audience segments connects to.

* The Ridgeway Strategic Audience Analysis Worksheet/Model is named for Paul Ridgeway, Chairman of Ridgeway International, a global special events firm based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The diagram was originally sketched on the back of a napkin in a fast food restaurant, in the middle of the night, in Canton, North Carolina. We were preparing to work with a huge paper mill as it encountered a serious community relations and political problem.

Most successful initiatives require effective intelligence, input, and issue surveillance. The success of this entire approach rests on top management and, in particular, the leader of the organization, and the nature of the relationship desired with the front line supervisor.

There are five predictable, usually ongoing mistakes that cause internal communication efforts to fail:

1. **Too much attention is paid to Special Publics.** Chances are that we like these Special Publics. They are more like management in terms of leadership and, perhaps, even social station. Some may be famous, rich, or powerful. It is just more fun to deal with the publics that seem to be ready to deal with us.

Why is this a failure strategy? Because every one of these Special Publics has its own agenda that predominates and dominates its reason for being connected to you and your issue. Special Publics may abandon you, or bug you if their interests are being underserved or ignored.

2. **Failure to plug in your base.** When the Special Publics have questions about motivation, strategy, decision making, and even results, they move around Leaders and Top Management, and talk to friends, relatives, acquaintances, and informants located throughout your Base Audience. If the Base Audience's response is, "Management never tells us anything," you can bet that you have given the Special Publics more power than you intended.
3. **Avoid answering questions the base is asking.** When members of the community—including public policy makers, potential beneficiaries, or victims—inquire or are concerned about your strategies, they too will check with your base rather than with senior management. Once again, if the Base Audience is out of touch, disconnected, or disgruntled, the community will get mixed signals at best, if not outright internally sponsored opposition to the key ideas you are proposing and communicating about.
4. **Allow Upper and Middle Management to block or control communication.** This is silo country. The job of these managers is to sanitize, prioritize, homogenize, and detoxify any information getting to Top Management or Leaders. This group I refer to as the "ladies in waiting" (maybe the boss will stumble today and one of us will get the job, at least for a period of time). In all my years of working in this arena, breaking down these barriers, punching holes in the silos has been an almost insurmountable task. The one strategy that does work is to leapfrog over these individuals and have the boss go directly to First-line Supervisors, Employees, and even the Community. Force them to pay attention to what is going on in the organization rather than just looking up, blocking key information, and watching what the boss is doing, thinking, or deciding, all the while protecting their own turf.

Get ready for the complaints, whining, and pushback of Upper Management. Here is what you are going to hear, "If you insist on going around us, you diminish and, in fact, destroy our authority." "How can we be expected to run the business if the boss

can do and runs all the time, whenever he or she feels like it?” “I worked a long time to get here, now I want to have the control I thought I would get.”

5. **Engagement failure by Top Management and Leaders.** This is the most crucial ingredient to any employee communication strategy. Leaders must have the courage and the strategic foresight to leapfrog Middle Management and have an ongoing conversation and relationship with First-line Superiors. First-line Supervisors are kind of like Crew Chiefs or Master Sergeants in the military. The place falls apart unless these individuals are there to run it in a knowledgeable, useful, and helpful way every day. It is the boss' job to get out to the Supervisors on a regular basis to brief them, coddle them, compliment them, cite their successes, help them learn from their failures, and force them to pull information from those above them (in Middle and Upper Management).

Can it be this simple, you ask? In practice, it requires discipline and a genuine commitment by managers at every level to recognize the need to cascade information further down the process. By the same token, managers need to make sure that appropriate feedback gets pushed up the line and actually reaches top management.

Management's goal in employee communications is to connect with and direct 51 percent of those who matter. If 51 percent of those who matter can work together, the success of virtually any organization will be assured.

Ridgeway Strategic Audience Analysis Worksheet

SPECIAL PUBLICS

Figure One

