


## Communicating from the Top

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One of the favorite pastimes of corporate gossipers, those who spend much time determining which way the corporate winds are blowing, is guessing what the CEO will do next. Part of the guessing is curiosity; the other part is gamesmanship. Curiosity is the urge to be in the know about what's going on; gamesmanship derives from knowing when to approach the CEO regarding key issues. The guessing game may be human nature, but it is a colossal waste of time. Worse, it de-energizes an organization; the guessing game focuses the attention and energy of individuals and teams from the work at hand and shifts it to things over which they have no control. There is a simple answer for the CEO (as well as every other C level executive) - tell your people what's going on!

### Breaking the knowledge lock

Simple to state, yes. Hard to execute, yes, yes! Why? Because CEOs live in a world in which they are pushed and pulled from meeting to meeting, city to city, continent to continent - morning, noon and night. What are they doing? Communicating, yes, but they are communicating to people within the inside loop, those with direct access to the person and people at the top. Good for them, but not so good for everyone else in the organization not so privileged. These folks know what is going on, not just on the surface but underneath. They know the context in which decisions are made: why and how organization does what it does.

By contrast those outside the loop are often clueless, left to guess as to what may come next. That is why it is up to the CEO to bring everyone in the organization into the loop; he or she is the only person who can do this. Why? Because in a world where knowledge is power, those who aspire to the ultimate power, will do whatever they can to keep it to themselves. It is up to the CEO to break that lock on knowledge and share it with the organization. Why? Because the more people know the better they can do their jobs. Simple as that! Part of the blame falls to the CEOs; those who do not communicate effectively are those who act as if communications were not important. Few would admit it aloud, but many act in such a manner that belies their true convictions. Communications from the top becomes essential. Here are some suggestions to make that happen. [Note: these lessons apply to all C level executives as well as most managers.]

*Share information.* Communications is based upon information. Many CEOs make it habit of sending out regular email correspondence. These organization wide emails provide updates on the business but they can do much more. For example, some CEOs use their emails as opportunities to initiate a dialogue, provide a brief on the competition, or even discuss ideas related to the business. Such emails move from informational memoranda to insightful thought pieces, trend analyzers, and tools of ideation.

*Share stories.* Nothing resonates more strongly within an organization than the CEO recognizing the achievements of individuals and teams. Part of the recognition involves telling the story behind the achievement. For example, stories about people who use their personal creativity or go the extra mile to satisfy a demanding customer let people know that their efforts are appreciated.

*Share excitement.* While information and recognition are vital to the organization, so too is a sense of passion about the business. Who better to convey this passion than the person on top? In fact, one of the chief roles of a CEO is to serve as cheerleader for the organization its people and its products. Oral communications through speeches and written communications through e-channels can spread the CEO's passion and energy. When employees sense the top boss cares, a little bit of that enthusiasm rubs off on them.

### **Two way communication**

Communication *from* the top must also include communication to the top. Too often the handlers around the CEO deem it beneath the dignity of a CEO to spend time with people outside the inner circle of knowledge. As a result, the CEO lives in a cocoon unaware of what is really going on in the organization. Savvy CEOs know better; they make it their job to meet and mingle with their people on a regular basis. Here are some suggestions to make it happen.

*Respond to email.* People want to connect to the people in positions of power. Personal access is not always possible, that is why email is so effective. CEOs from Art Lafley (P&G) to Ed Zander (Motorola) have made it known they want to know what their employees are thinking. One thing that CEOs appreciate is what their customers are thinking; front line employees are in the best position to provide this.

*Be seen in the halls.* The larger the organization the more remote the CEO seems. It need not be this way. Many CEOs take a page from Herb Kelleher former CEO of Southwest Airlines; he made it a practice to speak to everyone in his organization from baggage handlers and ticket agents and pilots to flight attendants. When the CEO is out and about he or she is listening to what people are saying. By spending so much time with employees, CEOs can determine what is working in terms of people, processes and products.

*Eat in the cafeteria.* Part of being seen is being seen in the correct light. One simple method is for the CEO to show up in the cafeteria from time to time. By eating lunch or having a cup of coffee with employees he or she demonstrates that he is part of the team and again interested in what people have to say.

### **Make it a habit**

There is no mystery about communications; the only real mystery is why so many CEOs neglect to practice it properly. But with attention to communicating to the entire organization and listening to them regularly, CEOs will build greater levels of trust and in time rally people to execute effectively and deliver inspired results.

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