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# The Mathis Group's Messenger

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Vol. 1 No. 4

June, 2003

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## Designing a Communication Plan for Change

By Dr. Keith Mathis



Communication is critical for driving change forward. Plans might be clear to the upper management who created them, but those same plans often become cloudy or muddled as they move farther down the organization. Creating a communication strategy helps the entire organization work to prevent this from happening.

When major changes are taking place, the rumor mill will tend to run riot as staff members tell different stories they have heard about the future state of the organization. If we do not communicate effectively, the rumors will increase. The false reports may push the organization into a state of paralysis. In the worst case, the rumors can lead to organized opposition toward the change initiative.

### ***Communication helps everyone plan his or her direction.***

Senior managers often assume each employee knows the future plan and is clear on the direction in which the company is moving. Too often, front line employees actually know very little about the plans that will affect their work. Deliberate and effective communication will allow personnel in all parts of the organization to plan for the coming changes.

### ***Communication creates vision for people to follow.***

An important aspect of organizational change is the creation of an appealing vision of the future. That vision will help drive the change process if it is shared by everyone who will be involved in bringing the ideal future state into existence. Staff in all areas of the organization can assist upper management in driving change if they know the direction. Such knowledge only comes as a result of effective communication.

### ***Communication creates parameters for measuring productivity.***

Middle level managers and supervisors normally are responsible for carrying out the practical aspects of change. Their participation is critical, but the parameters of the desired change must be communicated to them in a clear and precise fashion in order for the productivity of each employee to be guided and measured. The communication must take place across multiple channels, and it must utilize various methods if it is to achieve the best results. The more methods of communication you use, the faster you are likely to see the change implemented. This happens because multiple channels of communication contribute to greater

clarity and help reduce resistance. Below are some of the possible means of conveying your message about the change plan.

***Memos and written notices***—Memos and written notices are traditional means of communication. Most staff members see these on a daily basis, and they feel very comfortable with them. However, this method is limited in its effectiveness because it does not allow for non-verbal communication or feedback, both of which clarify understanding by the sender and the receiver of the message.

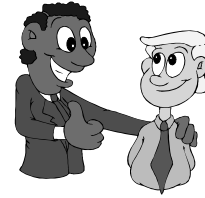
***Town hall Meetings***—Town hall meetings are held to facilitate an open discussion of ideas and information. The staff is invited to participate in the meetings. Flyers announcing the town hall meetings usually identify the topic for discussion, and they may give sufficient details about the topic to answer many of the questions in the minds of the employees. It is important to make the town hall meeting very specific in its focus. Visual aids such as graphics, transparencies, and slides can be used to explain what is happening and the impact it will likely have on the staff. It is also important for upper management to be positive in its message but not to the point of distorting the information. Distortion of the information will destroy the credibility of the leadership in the eyes of the staff and undermine the value of future town meetings. At the conclusion of the meeting, give the staff members who attend time to ask questions. Each question should be answered truthfully and with correct data. It is desirable to have the entire core change team participate and to allow them to answer specific questions in their areas of responsibility.

***Kickoff rallies***—Kickoff rallies are an effective means of arousing interest and commitment from the staff to a change initiative. The rally is similar to a town hall meeting in that it may allow people time to ask questions. However, the kickoff rally is different in that the entire change team normally shares the platform and multiple

**(continued on page 2 Communication Plan)**

*All it takes to make a good idea  
generate steam is a person who  
can get all fired up over it.*  
O.A. Battista

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presenters address the audience. You may ask each presenter to break the changes down into bite size pieces and to explain by departments how each employee will be affected. Kickoff rallies are normally very exciting and well attended. They give the entire change team an opportunity to present a unified, positive stand. You will find that kickoff rallies generate a fast buy in from the staff. For that reason, rallies may serve to jumpstart the change process.

**E-mail notices**—Creating e-mail notices or an e-mail server listing of all the staff is relatively easy. Using this method gives management one more tool to notify employees about concerns, meetings, or new changes and progression.

When e-mail notices are mentioned, many executives rule them out in favor of more traditional forms of communication, especially word of mouth. In the case of word of mouth, upper managers tell middle and front line managers, and they in turn pass the information on to the staff.

Time has shown that this method can be effective. However, the potential for messages to be unintentionally distorted, misunderstood, or corrupted is extremely high. To work effectively, the lower managers must be relied upon to provide the frontline employees with vital and often highly detailed information. In the communication chain, omissions and additions can occur that compromise the integrity of the original message.

If a manager fails to convey a particular piece of information, this leaves staff members out of the loop. The staff feels that management did not trust them, and the management is frustrated with the misinformation that is circulating throughout the organization.

In contrast to this often ineffective method, e-mail notices allow you to convey the information in such a way that it reaches everyone in the same form. You may discover that some of your people will use the e-mail notice to counteract the information they receive on the grapevine.

**Newsletters**—During massive changes some organizations have successfully used a newsletter to communicate progress. This form of communication is normally done on programs that last longer than two or three months. An example would be a program that is being implemented in several phases. Giving details of the phases and the progression of the changes through a newsletter helps people stay focused.

Using newsletters also allows you to recognize staff members publicly who go above and beyond what is expected in their work on the change project. Pictures, graphics, and notices in the newsletter can help to tell the story with great clarity.

**Banquets**—Banquets are an excellent way to provide social interaction for the staff while communicating important information.

In many kick-off meetings, upper management will provide supper or lunch as a token of good will for the employees.

To be effective, the banquet must be upbeat. In some cases, a longer program can be planned so that more details of the change plan can be spelled out for the audience. The program for the banquet may include special speakers, testimonies, and handouts with a detailed explanation of the change process. Some use handouts with toll free numbers for employees to use to ask questions anonymously.

**Training**—Training is a vital part of the change effort. Training allows communication to take place while it provides the employees with the skills necessary to make the transition process run smoothly. An example of this is the organization that conducts several programs on creating a positive work environment so they can overcome negativity between departments. This helps the employees understand techniques that work in changing personal and professional negativity, but it also builds morale. Another example is training the entire management team in strategic planning or conventional planning skills. This refreshes the skills of the team and encourages them to function at a higher skill level.

In conclusion, it is important to use multiple methods for communicating the vision and plan for change to all the personnel. Upper management must design a communication plan for dispensing information to the staff in a way that will reduce misinformation and increase trust and respect.



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