

Never Underestimate the People's Need to Know... Now!

Clear Communication Can Cause Productivity to Soar

By Marlene Minor

Maybe this has happened to you. It's Monday morning, *after* a weekend of catching up on work. You woke up early enough to even have prayer, devotions AND a brief workout.

Now, you've arrived in your office early. You've got a nice, early morning caffeine buzz going. It's going to be a great day.

Then, that one employee, who has never seen a glass half full in his life, walks into your office announcing, "Boy, have you got a big problem!"

Multiply that scenario by 10, add a perpetually challenging budget and you have a typical ministry manager's day.

In 25 years of ministry, most of it as a manager, the biggest challenge I've faced is having the right people in the right jobs to achieve goals. The second is making sure that the team is communicating well, pulling together toward the same goal. When it happens, it's sweet. When it's not, well, we've all been there.

I worked for Gannett Newspapers (owners of *USAToday*) for the first five years of my career. Every day I learned I had to solve every problem presented to me to get my part of the paper out by midnight.

In this environment, if there was a communication problem, *I had to solve it sooner rather than later – or the job would not get done.*

Too often, in Christian organizations, we work as though we have all the time in the world. We know we don't. And, of all people, we're more aware of the "ultimate" deadline—but it doesn't always translate into doing our absolute best at working for Christ until his return. Because we need to make every minute count, we need to be effective at communicating with employees.

David Allen, productivity trainer and consultant, says if a task takes 2 minutes or less, do it now. Often we can communicate clearly with someone in two minutes and, in doing so, radically increase his or her productivity and performance for hours. Here's what I've learned:

1. Talk over problems sooner than later with employees.

You often learn employee problems are not work related. Confronting them, however, allows you to express compassion (without enabling) and to help the employee set boundaries to get work done — even with their personal distractions. To help them, outline clear expectations of work so they can focus on their job. Never look away when you see employees are in trouble in their job performance. There's always a cause; sometimes a serious one.

When the problem is work related, it can be an unfounded rumor you can put to rest, or you may find an employee is unhappy in their position. This is a great time to see if changes can be made that will be a win-win for both of you. Or you may need to start planning for that person to move on.

2. Direct communication is more effective than indirect.

In the '90s I led a team that raised money for World Relief, a relief and development agency that helped people survive in war zones and disaster areas. We did important work. After all, if we failed to raise money, people would die.

Instead of helping employees see God had given us wonderful opportunities to be a part of his grace and mercy to people in need, I exuded pressure with my pace. An hour of dictation to and from my home every day; 10-12 hours a day; push, push, go, go.

I was indirectly communicating loud and clear to my employees. I learned later on it's not healthy for anyone to live at that pace and, as a manager, it is intolerable to set that kind of expectation for employees. Instead remember to:

3. Talk openly with employees.

I will always struggle with work balance. Now, I speak directly to another woman in my office and tell her it's time for her and I to leave. If we don't we will ruin our health, fail to have balanced lives and not perform as well the next day.

Watch the body language of people when you are talking in a meeting. If they don't respond or seem to get/buy in to what you

are saying, talk to them about it. I'll often say, "I noticed in the meeting that you seemed to have a question or concern ..."

Now, be prepared. If you ask, they'll tell you. You must not be defensive. An administrative assistant on my current team has great insights and asks a lot of questions. I've opened the door for her to ask me things that the constituency would ask. Who should know better? She's worked with the constituents for 20 years.

4. Have an open door.

I'm, at heart, a writer and I like my privacy when I work. I've learned, however, I have to keep my door open – *literally and figuratively*. There are times when you can't avoid a closed door (personnel issues, salary discussions, etc.) but, the rest of the time, leave that door open.

When it's closed, people imagine bad things are about to happen. Is their boss looking for a job? Should they be looking for a job?

Having an open door allows people to:

- **Ask questions about changes** that may be coming. Be as open and honest as you can.
- **Vent discouragement.** Less experienced employees, however, may get discouraged when criticized. Share your own experiences of being criticized and help them build on this time to improve their work for the future.
- **Help establish priorities.** People are less productive when they think everything has to be done at once. Keep reinforcing principles that help them guide their own decision-making process even when you are out of the office.
- **Assemble the team periodically to review progress.** Don't be afraid to assess accomplishments and failures. Quit doing things that don't work and redouble efforts that are working.
- **Make sure that team members can articulate their own role in reaching the big picture.** Give them time in

meetings to offer ideas of how they can contribute to the over-arching goal. This means they need time in advance to prepare for the meeting.

These are guidelines I've learned from my work (and mistakes!), and lessons from my dad, a manager for more than 45 years. The best insights, however, come from praying for staff and remembering we do the work and the results belong to God. If he can roll back seas, raise the dead and give his son for us, I don't think any Monday-morning problem is beyond his reach.

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