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## Effective Communication

By Paula M. Singer, Ph.D. and Laura L. Francisco, PHR

In recent years, communicating with employees has become more sophisticated and complex. No longer can we simply post an announcement in the staff kitchen and assume the job is done. It is important for information to flow vertically as well as horizontally within the library. In this manner, employees are not only able to give and receive the information they need, but are able to trust management as well as each other. Listening has been recognized as an imperative skill that must be learned (and re-learned) and cultural differences are adding to the communication challenge. Regardless of the means of communication or the reason for initiating it, the key to good management is effective communication within an organization. Although this requires effort, the benefits are extremely rewarding.

At work, we use communication daily for a variety of reasons, including:

- Day-to-day exchanges
- Emergency circumstances
- Informational purposes
- Giving directions and instructions
- Praising and coaching
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Interacting with customers
- Training
- Reprimanding

Communication can be as informal as a “Good morning,” or as formal as a semi-annual performance appraisal meeting. Whether formal or informal, there are a variety of tools that can be used:

- Face-to-face conversations
- Memos
- Newsletters
- Paycheck inserts
- E-mail
- Telephone
- Voice mail
- Meetings
- Intranets
- Text and instant messaging
- Blogs

A library needs to determine which methods of communication are most effective for them. If trying to recruit college seniors, this market of individuals may respond well and prefer blogs, Internet sites, and e-mail. On the other hand, when explaining a new policy or procedure to an older worker, they may prefer face-to-face communication. In order to attract potential employees and satisfy current employees, libraries should continue to update technology in order to improve communication.

In addition, the most appropriate communication method for the situation needs to be determined in order to be effective. For example, a performance appraisal review should not be given to an employee or conducted via e-mail. E-mail should not contain confidential information and/or replace face-to-face conversation within the library.

### Fact

A 2003/2004 Watson Wyatt study found that high levels of effective communication have a positive impact on employee turnover. According to the study, companies that communicate effectively are more likely to report turnover rates below those of their industry peers that communicate less effectively (33.3 % versus 51.6%, respectively).<sup>1</sup>

## Promoting Open Communication

In order to promote open communication within a library, an Open Door Policy and a Communication Policy or statement can be included in the Employee Handbook. This will inform all employees that the library takes open communication seriously and values the opinions of the staff.

**Sample Open Door policy:** Library management maintains an open door policy. Your supervisor is the person to turn to with your problems, questions, criticisms, and suggestions. S/he is responsible for the day-to-day operations of your department or unit, its workload and flow, budget, staffing, and growth. If you need someone else to talk with, you are encouraged to schedule time the Human Resources Manager or Library Director, to discuss freely your concerns and suggestions. We are interested in your thoughts, ideas, questions and solutions, and welcome the opportunity to discuss them with you personally.

**Sample Communications policy:** Communication is a “two-way street” between Employees and Management. The library provides information to you and you should provide feedback and communicate information to management. Our style is informal and employees should feel free to discuss with their supervisors or other management staff ideas, concerns and problems. Employees are encouraged to present to management constructive suggestions for the improvement of operations and management is responsible to recognize and reward all eligible employees whose suggestions are properly submitted and accepted.

Also, management can (and should) attend communications and supervisory skills training to improve in this area. These steps toward improving communication should make employees more willing to listen and trust management when they communicate ideas and suggestions for the workforce.

If trust has been an issue in the past between employees and managers or if the trust relationship could use some improvement, listed below are some steps to improve the trust relationship through communication:

- Get your leaders in front of people. Let your people see leaders visibly handling issues with candor, credibility and concern.
- Tell all the news you have. Tell everything you know so that employees have little room to jump to their own conclusions.
- Offer the opportunity for dialogue. The translation and interpretation of messages happens through dialogue and demonstration, not by reading memos.
- Balance high tech with high touch. Computers are great for fast communication, but they don't replace in-person conversation and discussion.
- Listen to your employees. The process doesn't have to be formal. Just making the effort sends a positive message.
- Communicate and involve more, not less.
- Remind people of the mission/vision of the library.
- Help people see their roles and to have a positive attitude.

## Enhancing Communication

Whatever method(s) of communication your company decides to use, there are some ways to enhance the effectiveness of all types of communication:

- **Listening:** This involves knowing when to stop talking and start listening. This is vital when emotions are high, when a team is involved, and when sharing ideas openly. When “listening,” pay close attention to what is being said and not what to say next; allow others to finish, and repeat back what was just said to you.
- **Facilitating:** This involves hearing what was said, integrating that into the topic and saying something to move

the conversation forward. This will prevent the conversation from “going in circles.”

- **Questioning:** There are a many types of questions that can be asked to gather information. There are closed questions that only require a yes/no answer, and there are open questions that require an explanation or scenario.
- **Use discretion:** Know when to keep information confidential so that trust is not lost.
- **Directing:** Use in order to give directions clearly so that people know exactly what to do and what is expected of them.

When effective communication is taken seriously throughout an organization many benefits will be realized: There will be a more pleasant, more productive work environment, employees will feel valued, ideas will be shared openly, and a trusting relationship will be established.

## References

1. Watson Wyatt, Connecting Organizational Communication to Financial Performance—2003/2004 Communication ROI Study, [www.watsonwyatt.com/research/resrender.asp?id=w-698&page=1](http://www.watsonwyatt.com/research/resrender.asp?id=w-698&page=1).

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*Dr. Singer and Ms. Francisco are with The Singer Group, Inc., a Human Resources/Organization Design and Development consulting firm. They can be reached at [pmsinger@singergrp.com](mailto:pmsinger@singergrp.com), [lfrancisco@singergrp.com](mailto:lfrancisco@singergrp.com), or 410-561-7561. The Singer Group's website is [www.singergrp.com](http://www.singergrp.com).*

*You may also want to read the [Worklife article on Listening](#).*

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