

The Power Link in the Chain

Energize your people and teams
with enhanced communication

By Linda Trignano

The phrase “you are the message” is as accurate today as when the book of the same name was written back in the 1980s by Roger Ailes and Jon Kraushar. The authors knew that everything a person does or says conveys some type of communication. Unfortunately, too few people realize and acknowledge their own need to communicate better. As a supply chain manager, it is crucial to recognize that—regardless of processes, technologies, or the sophistication of systems—your success depends on how well you relate and communicate.



Experts say somewhere between 70 and 80 percent of the workday is spent communicating in one form or another. Because time is money, being aware of your communication abilities is essential. Supply chains are as much about the intangibles (people and relationships) as they are about the tangibles (materials and data). Effective communication is the critical link that brings together all the parts in the network to produce outstanding results.

Communication channels

Information is conveyed through a variety of channels: in-person discussions, email, phone, Skype, social media, and more. These valuable tools also create challenges, such as managing the mountain of emails that arrive in your in-box each day, navigating global time zones, understanding cultural differences, and working to overcome the many intertwined functions in the supply chain. Add to all of this the complex nature of supply chain management and today's hectic "24/7, always on" pace, and it's no wonder that communication breakdowns are common.

With so many messages coming at us, our attention spans are actually getting shorter. In *The How of Wow*, Tony Carlson writes, "We have programmed ourselves to tune out information very quickly, to filter out information that does not have immediate tangible relevance to us ... It needs to be that way in order for us to get through the day. However, it makes your job tough if your goal is to cut through all that noise and not only be heard, but also be remembered."

A 2010 survey by the American Management Association found that, although 90 percent of executives recognized soft skills as important, fewer than half rated their employees as being above average with those skills. An added difficulty as supply chains become more and more global is that teams are becoming increasingly diverse. When you have a mix of people, you inevitably have a mix of communication skills, styles, and gaps, which affects speaking, listening, collaborating, critical thinking, and creativity. Good technical knowledge also is required, as well as the ability to integrate systems into the communication channel.

Communicate well, and you'll reap the rewards of more productive teams with fewer errors and smoother operations. On the other hand, poor communication leads to a wide variety of issues that affect all points along the supply chain. Rick Cathers, CPIM, president of MicroCraft, offers an example of how easily a lack of shared understanding can have a negative impact on work efforts. On numerous occasions, he has addressed differences among people in their understanding of a simple phrase such as "on-time delivery." He says words often do not have the same meaning to everyone. For one team member, "on-time delivery" might signify a handoff to the next work center. To another, it indicates distribution to the end customer. Clearly, this type of communication breakdown can cause problems that cascade through the supply chain to the detriment of all parties.

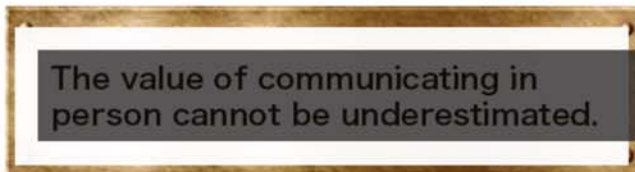
For Cathers, an effective way of addressing this lack of consensus is to get everyone in the same room talking together. He says that face-to-face communication leads to a shared appreciation that fos-

ters a cohesive effort with all parties working on the same objective and in the same direction. The value of communicating in person cannot be underestimated. It helps form relationships, creates more productive and effective teams, and makes it possible to resolve issues quickly. There is a weaving and interconnection of words and thoughts that come together when people talk to each other that enhances their work.

It's true that being in the same place on the same day isn't always feasible for many work teams. In these instances, the use of technology to facilitate communication offers real value in time savings and availability of data. But be aware that frequent in-person meetings still should be a priority. It's difficult to imagine a workday without email, instant messaging, or Skype; although, interestingly, a small number of companies have initiated "email-free" days, with the goal of fostering a work environment where people actually speak in person.

Evaluating engagement

Recently, I was asked to conduct a communication assessment and skills training for a company experiencing difficulty with morale and redundant work efforts. After assessing the situation, I determined that the problem was lack of face-to-face communication coupled with a resistance to giving honest feedback when it was appropriate and needed. The underlying problem was basic: The



team leader, who had an authoritarian management style, was shutting down communications by blocking every attempt team members made to bring issues to the surface and overriding their decisions. Staff members talked with me candidly about her poor management style. They told me they did the tasks as she directed, but they didn't do the work willingly or with an attitude that promotes employee engagement.

An online assessment of the team members, called DiSC, was conducted before any coaching work began. This evaluation helped us determine each employee's unique style and illustrate how to build the skills needed to understand other peoples' manners of communicating. After completing the assessment and sharing the results, I spoke with each team member and advised him or her how to use the insights in order to converse more effectively with each other and the manager. This facilitated understanding and taught people to flex and blend their styles with that of other team members in order to build solid communication. The training resulted in improved communication skills and the ability to cope better with a difficult manager. This illustrates that interpersonal communication skills can be learned and improved when education and practice are embraced.

Leading the way

Excellence starts with leaders setting the tone. Here are three suggestions to get started:

1. Understand yourself and your style of communicating, and then aim to be aware of and understand the different communication styles of your team members, peers, suppliers, and customers—and how they can affect overall performance. There are some excellent programs available that can help you gain knowledge and understanding in how to work with and balance different communication styles.
2. Communicate openly and often to ensure that all members of your team are informed and engaged. Know and understand what motivates them and how they respond to challenges. In a nutshell, this means getting to know them—and to do that, you must talk to them directly.
3. Listen to what others are saying. Most of us want to be heard and acknowledged for what we can offer. Create an environment that gives everyone an opportunity to speak up and foster collaboration and engagement.

The most successful businesspeople do two things very well: They understand people, and they communicate. To do this, they are receptive to two-way know how to dialogue; answer questions

thoroughly; use positive, open body language; are clear and comprehensible; and recognize others' needs to be heard and acknowledged. Take an honest look at where breakdowns occur with your own team, and then commit to developing and implementing a plan to improve your overall communication strategy. These steps take time and focus, and they often require coaching in order to produce the results you need to move forward. But becoming a great communicator will prove to be well worth the effort when you begin developing stronger relationships, growing into a better leader, and achieving real progress.

Linda Trignano provides coaching and consulting to managers and teams to improve communications and increase productivity. Through her firm, Trignano Consulting, she helps individuals and business groups maximize performance through targeted communication skills training. She may be contacted at ltrignano@optonline.net.

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Presented by:
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President
Trignano Consulting

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