

Marikana has shown how poor communication can be a killer

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One thing was abundantly clear to me when I looked at the tragedy of what is now being called "The Marikana Massacre" and that is everyone from the mine management to the police, government and the miners themselves, failed hopelessly when it came to communicating with each other.

I cannot recall how many times I have written about this subject, but I believe that communication is so important that I am fully justified in banging on about it with monotonous regularity. After all, the lack of it ended up with a lot of people losing their lives last week.

Singularly useless

What businesses, politicians, unions and government departments keep forgetting is that the very thing that is so fundamental to everything they do is also something that human beings are so singularly useless at. And that is communication.

Of all living organisms, however, *Homo sapiens* comes stone last in the art of communication. Even bacteria communicate better.

If you're not convinced about how bad we are at it, try the good old broken telephone test. Get a dozen or so people to sit round a table and write down on a piece of paper a simple message. Something like: "England's barmy army are sports spectators." Now, whisper this simple little phrase into the ear of the person next to you. He in turn whispers it into the ear of the person next to him and so on. Each person is allowed only one chance to hear and then transmit the message.

Never ever has the original message gone round the table and stayed intact. By the time "England's barmy army are sports spectators" is halfway round the table it will have been misinterpreted into something like: "Robert Mugabe is a short dictator."

So, how does one handle internal communications ?

Cannot cascade

Certainly the most popular system of "cascading" doesn't work. This is when a message that needs to go out from a board meeting to an entire organisation is passed on from various directors to their senior managers who pass it on to middle

managers, to their underlings who eventually pass it on to supervisors and ultimately the workers.

It hasn't a hope in Hades. And even when it does work it takes ages - anything up to three months a more to filter through an organisation of a few thousand people.

That's human nature. But, why not use human nature to do the job? Why do we insist on using systems we're bad at instead of things we're really good at? Like rumour-mongering and trying to get other people into trouble so we can have their jobs?

I'm not joking. I was once asked by the board of a multi-national to suggest ways of improving internal communications after years of frustration at the lack of success of the cascade system.

Grapevine

The directors wanted the entire organisation, some 3000 people and a network of retailers, to hear about a new product development as quickly as possible, I suggested the "grapevine" method, which involved asking the MD's secretary, for the name of the company's most active rumour-monger.

With the marketing director charged with the task of getting a message across to the company, I suggested he corner the rumour-monger in some quiet corner and as part of idle conversation say to him; "Don't tell anyone but we've decided to go ahead and launch this new product..."

It took 45 minutes for the first retailer to phone in asking if the rumour was true..." It took less than that for the message to get to everyone inside the company.

This method is limited only by the number of gossips in any one company. Which for most businesses is simply not a problem.

Ineffective

I am not suggesting for a minute that the police or mine management would have been able to avert the tragedy at Marikana by using a gossip-mongering grapevine but I am certainly suggesting that the way they seem to be trying to communicate right now is singularly ineffective.

I would guess it is probably because they are so busy worrying about what shareholders might think and how the bottom line will be affected or how much barbed wire to roll out and what ratio of rubber bullets to live ammunition they should use, that they simply don't have the time or the inclination to actually sit down and think about how they will be able to communicate.

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