

## Squeaky managers need the most communications oil

A top international negotiator, Herb Cohen, once said that all communication exchanges between people are cultural, when you consider that interpersonal communication is between two individuals with completely different perspectives. The analogy is an excellent way of highlighting the challenges of communicating between different individuals or groups.

By [John Bradfield](#) 27 May 2004

In this month's column I review some of the dynamics involved in communications between employers and employees in rapidly changing work environments.

Through global trade there are many cross cultural exchanges today but communication remains difficult because of the obvious differences of languages, value systems, expectations, and ideologies. Recently visited Sweden and it was interesting to see how political and economic concepts that we take for granted in South Africa were not easily understood. It took a while to reach understanding on basic concepts before moving on to the real heart of the discussion.

There are large divides between many different groups in our societies but perhaps the biggest 'cultural' gap is between the bosses and workers in organisations.

The London Independent Business Monthly recently reviewed a new book called "CoolSearch – Keeping your organisation in touch and on edge", by Jean Lammiman and Michel Syrett. The reviewer, Roger Trapnell mentioned that a survey in 2000 found six main characteristics worth noting about the Millennials (or Generation Y as this group is usually known). The six were: "they welcome change, think differently, are independent, entrepreneurial, want opportunity more than money and security, demand respect in a way that predecessors couldn't." If this isn't enough of a challenge for the workplace, note that the authors believe that the "greatest challenge over the next two decades will be to create management and employment practices that cut across as many as four generations working simultaneously for the organisation." In South Africa we can add other dimensions that make the task of managing and communicating even more challenging.

Management is increasingly under the spotlight as they try to extract increased levels of productivity from employees. But as the Independent article indicates, increasingly employees want greater levels of autonomy – they want to be left alone. There is a growing gap between the two groups. Managers need to give employees greater freedom to operate but at the same time need to watch progress towards goal accomplishment. In fact, managers need to find other ways to add value – to determine how to add increased value for the organisation – as standing over employees and monitoring their work is no longer becoming acceptable or effective.

The resulting conflict of poor communication between managers and employees can be devastating. Work relationships can become the source of much distress, leading to loss of productivity or even exit from the workplace as a final resort.

Workplace change, almost constant these days, also contributes to the underlying problems. In an article entitled, "Shake-ups that leave us shaken but not stirred", the Financial Times' Alison Maitland notes that a new study (Changing Times, by OPP) explains "poor communication is often to blame, as are change

imposed from above and an absence of obvious benefits." She writes: "Employees want to understand what changes are happening. The communication strategy should be complemented by an understanding of the different kinds of support that employees will need."

Take an average South African workplace and it won't be long before you find similar themes emerging – where is the company going, how do I stand with my job, how will these changes affect me, will the company support me – are just some of the more frequent questions. Sadly, companies are not known for their sensitivity in handling human affairs and even in the international arena few companies are cited by employees as being strong in employee relations – the only one I can think of offhand (mostly frequently mentioned by employees) is SAS Institute.

In most companies there is a large gap between management and employees. The cynics nearly always point to management wanting to withhold information from employees. This suggests the urge to create an imbalance of power in the relationship. It also implies a lack of trust. Some communications practitioners I've spoken to in different countries believe that managers sometimes quite simply don't know how to communicate with their subordinates and that this needs to be corrected through communications training managers. This is a competency model approach and seems a reasonable place to start. Training also helps to promote more favourable attitudes, which can go a long way towards helping to build relationships with employees.

A communications consultant friend often mentions the classical Johari window, which helps to identify how you see others and how others perceive you. Nearly always there is a 'blind spot' in our perception that is difficult to identify unless we take some sort of deliberate approach to make our shortcomings explicit. The sad fact is that often everyone else knows about the manager's shortcomings, which are openly discussed around the water cooler, between HR and the manager's subordinates or boss, but no one is 'brave' enough to sit the manager down for a little heart-to-heart chat.

In excellent organisations, supporting managers with communications tools can be helpful to narrow the gap between managers and employees, but in this case the manager should already have some sort of good relationship with employees otherwise such efforts are not likely to be successful.

A communications manager I visited in Stockholm recently said to me that he enjoyed reading these columns. I was quite pleased that some of the challenges that we experience in South Africa have a resonance elsewhere. Humans often have quite a lot in common despite cultural differences. As he pointed out to me, people like to be recognised, made to feel special and valued. My rider is that one has just to be careful in being seen as manipulating people or becoming patronising because employees will smell a fake from a kilometre away.

Communications between two people can often be difficult enough. But when exchanges take place between groups with different – and competing – interests, but who need to work towards common goals, the challenges grow proportionately. Rather than letting your managers remain as the jam in the middle of the management and employee sandwich, try aim to change things so that the middle becomes a bit more appetising.

## ABOUT JOHN BRADFIELD

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