

## The ACTIV<sup>2</sup>E Leadership Model, Part 2

### Communication

A member will stay with an organization when informed about the group's happenings, vision, and opportunities. In mission accomplishment, communication is vital. Members of the team must be informed about the mission or goal, their role, what precisely is expected of them, and what outcome is expected. What a leader says – or doesn't say – has a tremendous impact on both the level of participation of the organization's membership and their effectiveness.

We typically do a great job communicating with our customers and the public at large. Particularly in the profit sector, businesses realize that a public that knows the company, knows the product, and knows how the product benefits them will buy the product. Communicating with the public equals revenue. With that said, it's as important to revenue to communicate, as well with the organization's members.

So many times we've all heard, "I didn't know I was supposed to be at that meeting," or "I've been here two weeks and the boss hasn't told me his expectations," or even, "I never saw the calendar, so I didn't know there was a unit picnic." Poor communication may be due to a flaw in the communication process, or inadequate or inaccurate information being passed through the chain. It may even be due someone to just "not getting the word." But don't let the inevitable one person lull you into always believing it's the receiver's fault.

Whatever the cause, the effect is the same. Every time a member utters these words, it decreases the motivation to the member to participate, lowers member morale, and most importantly signals the inability for the organization to accomplish the mission or goal.

### Communication and Impact

All paths of communication through the chain of command or hierarchy – up, down, and laterally – impact mission performance and member morale. Doesn't it tick you off when you don't get the word – not just because you don't feel included, but because you can't do your job. Each avenue of communication (upward, downward and lateral) is as vital as the others. Ignore one piece, the whole system suffers.

### Downward Communication

Downward communication includes everything transmitted from the boss' or commander's desk to subordinates at all levels – urgent and routine information, as well as short and long term planning. Members need to know the vision the boss has for the department, and they need to know where their department is going. They must know where they as individuals fit into those plans. If they don't those plans cannot be fully supported. The result can be cancelled activities, improperly executed plans and programs, and missed opportunities.

Members must also feel free to ask questions for clarification. Sometimes downward communication is hampered because the members don't feel comfortable asking the boss to explain the information a little more clearly.

### **Upward Communication**

Likewise, commanders, bosses, and aspiring leaders have to be sensitive to upward communication from their people. There is no substitute for feedback in determining whether the leader's messages are not only received but also *understood*<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, members need to know that their opinions and observations are important to the operation of the organization. Poor upward communication can lead to the commander/boss being in the dark on important issues. The plans the leader makes won't be practical or relevant, and the organization will suffer.

Why can this happen? In many situations, it's based on the follower's perception that the boss isn't receptive to upward communication. This can be especially true when the leader uses the directive/authoritarian leadership style. The members may simply be too frightened to speak (shooting the messenger).

When this is the case, the boss must make a special effort to examine how they react to upward communications, particularly bad news. They must also examine how they view their relationship to their subordinates. A boss who feels they have all the answers may tend not to welcome feedback from subordinates.

Poor upward communication can also happen with bosses who exhibit the laissez faire leadership style. They may be so hands off that they just don't feel the need to listen or participate. This is as dangerous, because they simply will be off in another world.

### **Lateral Communication**

Finally, attention must also be paid to communication that happens laterally within the hierarchy. Much communication takes place at this level, and while much of it is informal, it must be considered. If communication up or down the chain is lacking, members will use lateral communication to fill the vacuum. The most common example of this type of communication is the grapevine.

The grapevine is not necessarily bad, if it does not turn into the primary source of information within the organization. In fact, it can be effective in determining how effective your official avenues of communication are. Because the grapevine is so prevalent, false information can spread like wildfire. Once inaccurate information is introduced, it is extremely difficult to correct. Instead, use lateral communication to spread the information you do want.

The worst thing you can do is try by edict to kill the grapevine. Like dandelions or kudzu, you can't get rid of it; it will just grow stronger as your followers will react negatively. Remember,

they need information as badly as you do, and you would be taking away what they view as a valid source of information.

The best thing you can do is examine why the grapevine happens. Ask what it is about the formal system that is not working. As you fix the problems in the official system, the grapevine will become less about rumor and more about data.

There are other, less clandestine forms of lateral communication as well. Peer groups within organizations are getting more popular, celebrating diversity and common interests. While these groups are recreational, they are also used to spread information. They are neat, sanctioned avenues to spread information.

So are employee councils and committees. They can serve both as an upward conduit to the leadership and as a lateral liaison to downward communication.

### **Getting in the Loop**

So what can be done to get your members “in the loop?” Does your system need to be fixed, or is it working well? Even if you believe the system works fine, ask the question anyway, you may be surprised.

Official communications avenues can be very effective: regular meetings, newsletters, mass e-mails, individual appointments, the unit web page, Twitter feed or Facebook page, committees, etc., are just a few of the ways. Perhaps all you need is to just take a little time to make sure it works.

For a typical organization, there are literally dozens of sources of official communications: web sites, intranet, news letters, handbooks, policy letters and staff communications, even the classic bulletin boards. Make these sources of information available to your members, and ensure each source is used regularly.

Create predictable sources of information. There are many people who don’t know where to look for specific pieces of information. If you have information that is transmitted only in certain ways, advertise those ways widely.

Local supervisors can create department bulletin boards, publish a department calendar and schedule, and schedule a 15-20 minute staff meeting once a week. Talk with people.

Hand in hand with talking with one’s members ensures they can talk back. Empower them with a strong voice. Let them know that their opinions are wanted and appreciated. They may see things bosses can’t; they have great ideas. Creating communication up and down creates buy-in, and interest and participation will increase.

Examine ways to foster formal lateral communications avenues, such as councils and organization-sanctioned clubs. Find ways to get peers to talk with each other by sanctioned means.

Finally, recognize and allow informal lateral communication as long as it doesn't interfere with the official communications processes. It can be very effective at creating and maintaining interest. But ensure the official system doesn't create a vacuum where a grapevine can take over as the most prevalent and trusted means of employee communication. Make sure the organization's members aren't guessing by the water cooler.

While this essay, and this series is written with a focus on aspiring leaders, everyone needs to participate. Communication is a true partnership between leaders and followers. It's a follower's obligation too.

With preparation, time, and follow through we can effectively and efficiently communicate with each other. When we do communicate together – and for everyone – the followers you lead will have the information to work with you, and stay with you.

### **Notes**

1. Kline, John A; Listening Effectively, Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, AL, April 1996, p 20