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Abstract

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Middle Managers: Facing the Communication Challenge

Effective communication at all levels is a vital element of a smoothly running organization. Here is a look at how some middle managers overcame their communication problems

by Judi Brownell

CALL HIM Jeff Colburn. He's 31 years old and has been working in hotels for nearly ten years. Two years ago he was promoted to reservations manager at the Osborne, a 650-room eastern-U.S. property, where he supervises 16 employees. Jeff is typical of the almost 100 hospitality managers from across the country who helped me create a composite picture of the communication activities that shape their work on the job. Through on-

site meetings, telephone interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, they shared their perspectives on the challenges of business communication in the 1990s. In their own words, respondents like Jeff tell us what it's like to be managing in the middle.

A review of participants' responses to some general questions regarding their daily communication will help to determine how you and your colleagues compare to your peers across the country. In this article, I will explore the challenges

middle managers face in facilitating upward communication, in communicating downward to their own work group, and in maintaining effective relationships with other middle managers. I will then present guidelines for increasing effectiveness in what appear to be the critical communication situations hospitality managers face.

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Managerial Communication

Why is it so important to understand how to communicate effectively? For one thing, no other managerial competence is so directly tied to job success. Every one of your daily activities—motivating, influencing, explaining, delegating, coaching—depends upon communication effectiveness. In fact, you probably spend over 80 percent of your day communicating. Just think what a difference it would make if you improved your performance by even 10 percent!

As the work force becomes more diverse, communication skills will be even more important in determining the ease with which all employees respond both to their coworkers and to their daily job requirements. In your leadership role, your communication behavior provides a model for your employees and influences morale, organizational climate, and, ultimately, both service quality and productivity.

One of the first steps toward improving communication on the job is to attain a better understanding of what goes on during the course of a typical day. It's easy to make assumptions about how someone like Jeff spends his time behind the scenes at the Osborne. You can guess whom he interacts with and how satisfied he is with the way he handles these regular encounters. It would be more helpful, however, to ask him questions that would create a vivid and accurate picture of his communication activities.

A Communication Profile

Several questions appear to be particularly important. First, to whom are middle managers talking? When this group was surveyed, every respondent indicated that he or she communicates with subordinates several times

EXHIBIT 1

Self-reported communication activities of middle managers

These survey data show how middle managers rate themselves regarding communication activities.

	Frequency			Skill level		
	Seldom	Sometimes	Frequently	Poor	Moderate	High
Memos to subordinates	38%	18%	44%	25%	67%	8%
Memos to superiors	17%	42%	41%	20%	77%	3%
Business letters	8%	27%	65%	34%	61%	5%
Reports	10%	27%	63%	33%	58%	9%
Presentations	15%	53%	32%	41%	44%	15%
Conflict management	0%	28%	72%	8%	84%	8%
Interviewing	10%	52%	38%	11%	78%	11%
Feedback	7%	33%	60%	34%	58%	8%

each day. Over 90 percent of those surveyed also talk daily with their colleagues. Relatively less time, however, is spent in face-to-face interaction with supervisors and guests; 22 percent of the managers surveyed said they talked to their supervisor only once a week. Over 30 percent talk with guests less than once a week.

Second, how difficult do managers think it is to communicate with these various groups? Employees, they say, have more trouble expressing ideas to their manager than managers do in communicating with employees. Sixty-one percent of those surveyed felt that employees experienced significant or great difficulty communicating upward, while just under 50 percent felt managers had significant problems communicating down to their subordinates. In contrast, 70 percent of the respondents found very little or no difficulty expressing ideas to their colleagues.

It may be helpful also to look at the *types* of communication that take place, and how much skill managers believe they have in performing each task (see Exhibit 1). As you might expect, managers are slightly more likely to send a memo to their supervisor than to their employees. Written communication, however, usually takes the form of a report or business letter. On a scale of one (seldom) to six (frequently), 63 percent of the managers surveyed indicated that they frequently wrote reports, and an even greater number said that they frequently wrote business letters.

Middle managers also appear to spend a good deal of their time engaged in oral communication activities. Over 30 percent of those surveyed frequently deliver formal presentations (only 15 percent said they seldom stand and speak in front of a group), while 35 percent participate frequently in some form of interviewing. The highest

categories, however, were resolving conflict and providing feedback. While 60 percent of the responding managers indicated that they frequently provided feedback to their employees, 72 percent of our sample frequently find themselves resolving conflicts.

Mixed messages. Now we know that managers spend a lot of time engaged in written and oral communication activities. The next question is, how skilled are they at each of these tasks? To answer this question, the managers were asked how well they felt other department heads and supervisors handled each type of communication situation. Using the six-point scale mentioned earlier, not one manager gave a rating of six to his or her colleagues on *any* task! While the managers felt their peers handled memos moderately well, 34 percent of those responding indicated that their peers wrote poor business letters, and about the same number gave them low marks on report writing.

Unfortunately, writing was not the only skill managers felt their peers lacked. The most troublesome area of all was delivering formal presentations. Over 65 percent of the respondents gave the category "making presentations" a ranking of three or lower and over 40 percent described their colleagues' presentations as poor. Although managers find themselves providing feedback frequently, 34 percent believe they do it poorly; fewer than 10 percent feel their colleagues do a good job at this task. Managers believed their peers were moderately skilled at both resolving conflicts (84 percent) and interviewing (78 percent).

This information should give you a general idea of how Jeff spends his time each day, and what his colleagues think about his communication behavior. Numbers, however, don't tell the whole

story. Let's look at some common communication situations as they affect Jeff's relationships at work and his ability to accomplish his management tasks.

Voices From the Trenches

The lines of formal communication are generally discussed in terms of the upward, downward, and horizontal movement of messages. Although we know that informal networks transfer information without regard for level or position, the formal channels are important to recognize and understand because managers can plan and control the nature and frequency of information transmitted in this manner. Once communication patterns have been determined, these networks can be analyzed and communication strategies implemented that will improve organizational effectiveness. First, let's look at the vertical dimension to (1) see what problems Jeff's subordinates have communicating upward to him and (2) examine his communication downward to his work group. Finally, we'll see what happens when he communicates horizontally with other department managers.

Upward communication. As a typical hospitality manager, one of Jeff's most serious problems is getting his employees to share information with him. A frequent complaint is that his employees are reluctant to communicate bad news. They seem afraid of reprisal and often don't explain the real problem, even when he asks them directly. At the same time, Jeff may behave in the same way with *his* boss. As one manager noted, this pattern is not unique to middle managers and their employees. It occurs in upward communication at all levels. A restaurant manager described the situation presented on the next page.

A frequent complaint of managers is the reluctance of employees to communicate bad news.

You find out that evening that you messed up—you missed a birthday cake. Do you turn around and talk about it? Do you say anything to the owner when he asks how the night went, when you know it will make his blood pressure rise and the veins in his forehead pop out? I mean, you feel caught in the middle. You insulate him from things and your people insulate you from things. This whole thing gets perpetuated.

Why this reluctance to share bad news? Managers were clear about the possible causes of their problems and fears. One explanation was that subordinates at all levels aren't asked often enough for their opinions or ideas. As one manager explained:

Our GM never asked how things were going. I mean, it just never dawned on her. She knew people were coming and going. Then a year later, we mentioned the turn-over statistics and it's like, "Well, yes, hello, hello—where have you been?" By then, imagine the organizational problems that had been caused! She had shut herself off and then it was hard to get back.

The most frequent explanation, however, was that employees fear the consequences of communicating bad news. The following stories are typical:

My boss is old school. If he didn't want to hear something, if it was a problem, that meant that somebody had to be fired. Now he's slowly begun to change his thinking. It's not that somebody needs to be fired; it's just that somebody needs to be trained a little better.

Another manager told of the following incident:

I got sick and tired of having the owner go into the dining room and ream out my waiters, which is very embarrassing when you have a roomful of guests. When he got through with the waiters he'd go to the captain and do the same thing. Then, when he got through with the captain, he'd come to see me. The captain ran one dining room; I ran three. So I'd get it three times as long. It's very discouraging; you're trying to do your job, and you have this guy screaming at you.

We know that upward communication is vital. Here are several strategies managers can implement to encourage information sharing—even when the news is dismal.

Encouraging upward communication. How can supervisors encourage subordinates to tell them what's going on? First, it's apparent that Jeff's employees must believe that he will listen openly and objectively to their problems and concerns. If he has a reputation for having a quick temper or for discounting what others say to him, the flow of information will be cut off.

Jeff would be wise to practice his listening skills, by asking questions and checking his perceptions rather than making critical, judgmental statements. The ability to listen to the entire message without becoming emotional is key. As one manager discovered, intimidated employees often resort to writing, thus blocking open, two-way communication. In one example, a manager described finding a note taped to his office door. It said, "If the problem I told you about yesterday isn't resolved right away, I'm going to quit!"

Jeff also needs to take the initiative and to be creative in his own problem-solving activities. What can he do, within the context of his particular property, to facilitate upward communication? As an example, one of his colleagues described the following plan:

I'd get everybody in one place at one time and say, "Okay, here's the situation. Take five minutes and read this and then I want feedback." I wouldn't let them leave until I heard something from every single person. "Is this garbage or do you think it's something useful? If it's garbage, why do you think so?" I had really good results with that approach.

Another organization took this idea even further, scheduling

monthly "town meetings" with the general manager herself. Employees were encouraged to raise questions and discuss issues first-hand.

Not only must managers themselves be creative and persistent in their efforts to facilitate upward communication, they must also recognize the impact their daily communication behaviors have on their employees.

Downward communication. Although Jeff would like to think that communication problems occur primarily because of unskilled line employees, communication breakdowns are seldom one-sided. His employees have their share of legitimate complaints about the way he handles information. As a front-desk employee explained:

There's a real problem getting information up to management. We'd sit down in a brainstorming session and say, "Okay, how can we improve operations in terms of giving better quality service to our guests?" We'd come up with the greatest ideas. We'd sit down with the front-office manager and talk to him, but nothing ever came back to tell us whether something was being done with our ideas. Were they filtered up, or did they just get lost somewhere along the line? Do suggestions work if you never hear anything back?

As this comment shows, downward communication is critical.

Two of the most serious communication problems, from the perspective of middle managers, are (1) lack of concrete information, and (2) reluctance on the part of managers to explain the reasons behind their decisions. With so much emphasis on cultural leadership, vision, and symbolic management, the bottom line still seems to be that clear and concrete information is needed at the right time and in the right place. One middle manager shared the following thoughts:

A lot of fine-dining restaurants think that the culture is just supposed to catch on, and that management philosophy just floats around. But when you get to dishwashers and busboys and people like that, the philosophy doesn't really matter. It's still, "What do you want me to do right now? I mean, I know you want a clean bathroom, but what is grout?" Then you have to explain, "This is grout. This is the bowl. This is the toilet brush...."

A second source of misunderstanding comes from managers' reluctance to explain the reasons behind their decisions. One manager described a typical example:

Our GM decided that she didn't want soft drinks around the front-office area. In the past, front-office clerks and PBX operators could have refreshments at their stations as long as they weren't visible to the guests. The GM felt there was no way to ensure that the drinks would stay out of sight, so she banned them altogether.

The trouble began when the night manager didn't follow the rules and allowed the night operator to have a drink at the work station. When the morning operators discovered this, they argued that it wasn't fair, and that they could also keep their drinks out of sight. The day manager gave in, and there were again sodas in the PBX area. When the front-office clerks found out, they brought sodas into their area, too.

The general manager should have told them from the start that visibility wasn't the only reason for the rule and that it was one small part of an overall effort to increase professionalism and to maintain consistency in the guidelines for all staff. Communicating only the "visibility" issue rather than the larger goal made following the rule difficult. Once employees understand why they are asked to do something, a rule is easier to enforce.

Successful Communication Strategies

If the examples above sound familiar, it's because middle managers everywhere face similar challenges and frustrations. Below are three steps to take in reducing or preventing common communication difficulties, including using horizontal communication to the best advantage.

Step 1: *Communicate detailed information as well as the big picture.* Jeff can increase his effectiveness by making sure that the information he conveys to his employees is concrete and specific, and that he encourages employee commitment by sharing the rationale behind the rules and policies he asks them to support.

It's easy to make assumptions about what employees know or understand. Such assumptions, however, are dangerous; employees can perform their jobs well only if they know exactly what is expected. As one manager reports:

My employees say, "Well, I thought someone would bring it to me. I didn't know it was my job to go get it." I hear such excuses all the time, and I think, "Why don't you just look around? Everyone else is doing it." But I say, "Why didn't you ask?" And they say, "I didn't know I was supposed to ask. No one told me." It just goes around and around.

Ambiguous instructions and vague job descriptions, such as "deliver high-quality service to all guests," have limited value in an industry where the competitive edge is defined by attention to detail. How do you know when you've been clear? As another manager says, "You know you're doing okay when all of your employees know how to dust the light bulb."

The recent emphasis on participative management recognizes employees' need to be involved in the decision-making process. Part of this philosophy requires that

Managers must demonstrate that they will listen openly and objectively to their employees' problems and concerns.

Once employees understand why they are asked to do something, and how their actions contribute to accomplishing the organization's goals, a rule is easier to enforce.

managers explain the reasoning behind their requests. When employees feel left out of the process, they are much less likely to follow rules. The hospitality industry, in particular, depends on employee involvement and independent decision making to a much greater extent than other industries. For this reason, helping them to see the "big picture" has a direct benefit. One manager explains:

The people who deliver the service are the lowest paid. In manufacturing, people are working the lines and building the gizmos, but there's somebody there checking those gizmos before they go out of the factory. Our product is how that desk clerk talks to the guest, and a lot of times we're not even there.

Jeff's challenge, then, is to promote a feeling of confidence and commitment among all of his employees. When his staff knows exactly what is expected of them and when they understand the larger picture, they can see how their actions contribute to accomplishing the organization's goals.

Step 2: Talk with other managers—communicate horizontally. Jeff and his staff know there is a lot they could do to improve interactions with employees. Jeff knows, too, that when he implements some of the ideas he's been considering, his interactions with his staff are almost certain to improve. However, it's the comments from his peers that upset Jeff the most. While a majority of the misunderstandings he experiences with his employees could be resolved by learning and practicing specific communication skills, his fellow managers report problems of a different nature. It appears that many of the challenges middle managers face when communicating with their peers result from specialized perspectives, defensiveness, and reluctance to share the necessary information.

In fact, a significant number of Jeff's colleagues indicated that

rivalries, gossip, and back stabbing were not unusual. In addition to personality conflicts, which make working together difficult, there was considerable finger pointing and "cover yourself" tactics, especially in departments that overlapped.

Competition for resources and loyalty to a particular department (rather than to the organization itself) caused many managers to take a myopic view. One manager writes:

Since hotels are organized with many different specialists (department heads), it is natural for a manager to have trouble empathizing and listening to a colleague with a different perspective. It is easy to forget that we all have the same overall goal.

This loyalty to a particular department or area frequently creates a situation where managers find it difficult to be open-minded. One manager noted that this problem is particularly apparent during meetings:

Generally, managers go into a meeting with a pre-determined outcome and spend all of their time trying to reach that outcome without listening or considering the others' input.

Managers were also quick to blame others for problems on the job. Often, problems resulted from insufficient information. In many cases, managers perceived that their colleagues withheld information, assuming that "subtle changes in their areas won't affect other departments." The resounding response, however, was, "But they do!"

Defensive communication was fueled by unclear lines of authority. Ambiguity regarding responsibility and procedures affected managers' relationships and the quality of their communication on the job. When working together on a task, department managers described feelings of resentment from their peers when they delegated assignments or took a strong leadership role.

Generally, Jeff and his peers felt strongly that specialized perspectives, insufficient information-sharing, and a predisposition to become defensive were the main obstacles to building strong peer-group relationships within their organizations. Although overcoming these barriers requires energy and commitment, effective horizontal communication is essential to ensuring smooth operations and effective management.

Step 3: Foster openness and trust. Jeff feels much less in control of the horizontal communication at Osborne than he does when communicating upward and downward. Consequently, he feels less able to facilitate positive change.

When working within his own department, Jeff has a sense of authority and power. It is relatively easy for Jeff, as the department supervisor, to exert influence on the situation at hand. When communicating horizontally across department boundaries, however, he wonders how one manager can have any significant impact on the behavior of his or her peers. He feels, too, that at least part of the problem has to do with managers' attitudes and lack of team spirit. Clearly, strategies that may work with a reluctant dishwasher will likely be inappropriate when used to influence the food and beverage manager.

Although the methods he uses with his colleagues may not be as simple and straightforward as those he finds successful with his staff, Jeff's behavior still has a significant influence on other department managers. A few changes in his own attitudes and communication practices will, over time, affect other managers. He can begin by approaching *all* communication situations with an open mind and by practicing behaviors that are likely to reduce defensiveness in those with whom he communicates.

It is difficult to stay open-minded, especially when competing for limited resources or engaging in some other type of persuasive activity. One manager described the situation well:

Manager to manager communication is affected by each individual's insecurities. Before I discuss a problem I'm having with another manager, I try to remember that there are two sides to every story. Many managers enter into a conversation already defensive and that tends to put the other manager on the defensive as well.

Building a supportive climate, characterized by trust and information sharing, takes time. The first step, however, is the recognition that "from the other person's point of view, she's probably right." Remaining open-minded and trying to understand how his colleagues see the situation will enable Jeff to improve communication with his peers.

Defensiveness is one of the most serious and frequent managerial communication problems. It can, however, be reduced by practicing the following communication behaviors.

- (1) Describe the behavior or problem that bothers you rather than make such judgmental statements as, "That was a stupid thing to say," or "You really blew that sale."
- (2) Focus on finding solutions to problems, not on placing blame on your co-workers.
- (3) Qualify opinions and controversial statements with such modifiers as, "It seems to me..." or, "From what I know of this situation..." rather than stating your position as if it were the only "right" way to think.
- (4) Show concern for the other person's position and point of view. Attitudes of indifference, apathy, and superiority may increase feelings of defensiveness in others.

When defensiveness is reduced, trust increases. When the environment is supportive, managers need spend less time protecting their reputation and personal territories and can look instead at the larger picture. When horizontal communication is effective, all managers are facing the same direction and following the same vision.

Teamwork and Trust

Perhaps your department managers are not at all like Jeff Colburn. Even so, it might be helpful for them to know some of the things we've discovered about middle managers' communication practices. It may be valuable for them to have a better understanding of the challenges others in their position face as they link line employees to upper-level management and as they span boundaries between their functional areas.

Although no two properties are alike, middle managers from across the country share common concerns and face similar problems as they perform their daily tasks. Most of those tasks involve communication, and the quality and nature of their interactions directly affect both productivity and service. Middle managers hold the key. Those who communicate effectively encourage information sharing and provide clear and sufficient messages to their subordinates. They promote a climate of teamwork and trust through their open-mindedness and supportive communication practices.

As middle managers look to the 21st century, they will see offices and function areas equipped with new and more sophisticated hardware. If they look more closely, however, they will notice that only in those properties where information is flowing smoothly through human links is the organization truly healthy and productive. □