

# Getting The Message Across

*It is hard to get something right when you are not even sure what it is you are trying to achieve. Stewart Forsyth highlights the importance of letting everyone know what really matters.*

In a world of more information and finite time, you and your people have to get better at screening information. For every item, you and they need to ask – does this really matter, will it help, what is it that matters anyway?

Is it surprising that staff consistently say they don't get it? They don't understand the goals of your business. They couldn't tell you about the new initiatives. They have difficulty with the values in the car park test (stopping them in the car park and asking them what values the organisation stands for).

How do we get them to understand the important performance outputs they are working to deliver?

## Clear Channels

Clear expectations of performance are fundamental to getting performance. As Somerset Maugham said: 'If you expect anything less than the best, you're likely to get it.'

I suggest four rules of communication – communicate, communicate, communicate and adjust your delivery to compensate for distance. This means:

- Choosing at least three different message modalities;
- The greater the distance between you and your people (culturally and geographically) the more consultative your communication should be.

And there's no point in listening if

you don't do something as a result, so be prepared to make adjustments.

## Put A Value On It

Organisational values should clarify what the organisation stands for. Your core values should be the things that guide the behaviour of you and your people the way a gorge channels the river that flows through it. Consider this example from Ford:

### *Quality is Job #1*

Assuming this is more than a poster hanging over an assembly line, what would a value – a belief – like this signify about expectations? If an assembler noticed, while fitting a seat belt, that the seat bolts were



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loose – what would his or her likely action be? Clarifying underlying values such as quality, client focus, and respect, can help guide people's expectations of what is appropriate, and what is not.

## Shared Understanding

How many planning sessions, strategic planning weekends, retreats or blue sky sessions have you participated in? It seems like an expensive

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way to knock up a plan doesn't it? Surely even the most expensive consultant could do the job for less than the opportunity cost of those valuable people sitting around doing their thinking and talking? (Well maybe not the most expensive consultant – a moderately expensive one perhaps.)

Of course such a suggestion ignores the need to tap into the unique knowledge that the planning participants have of the business. But even so – if the consultant interviewed them separately, the time spent listening to others could be cut couldn't it?

Perhaps one point in having such a retreat is to help these people clearly understand what it is they intend to do, without the distractions of work to obscure that understanding. Consider this:

*'many commentators argue that the process of developing <business measures and a business plan> is as valuable as the <plan> that results' – Andy Neely, Measuring Business Performance.*

It is not only the plan the group produce, it is also their shared understanding of what is required that matters.

## Bigger Is Better

In their book *Built To Last*, Porras and Collins suggest one thing that distinguishes more successful companies is their use of goals. Not just goals but BHAGs – Big Hairy Audacious Goals. By implication, these audacious, 'bet the company' goals are hard for most people to ignore. After all, if the company loses that bet, there probably won't be so many jobs around. Get the idea? Amongst other things, BHAGs help to get the message across about what's important right now.

Goals are the most effective way to clarify expectations. And they do make a difference to performance. What makes for performance enhancing goals?

- The higher you aim with your goals, so long as the height is seen to be achievable, the higher you get. This explains the importance of building 'stretch' into goals (or BHAG if you like the phrase better);
- The more specific, measurable and time-bound your goals are the better (getting the expectations as clear as possible);

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- Feedback (specific, timely, accurate and relevant) helps the performance towards the goal level – more about this in the next section;
- Commitment is important – it helps to set the goals participatively, and to have public commitment.

The harder the goals, the more performance you will get, with the proviso that the person must actually be able to achieve those levels.

## Nondescript Job Descriptions

You would think that having agreed job descriptions is the obvious way to clarify expectations about what the job is. So why do so few of us look for a job description when we want to know what is meant to be happening? Perhaps because job descriptions are not always up to the job? A few practical problems can be the job description:

- Is not a good description of the job – because it never was, because it hasn't been updated, because it actually describes a 'generic' job rather than this specific job;
- Was written by someone who doesn't understand the job (this is a tricky area, because research into the content of jobs suggests that often the job holder and the job supervisor disagree on over 30% of the job content!);
- Describes the tasks to be done – but doesn't define how to identify success in completing the tasks. You may be expected to support customers – but there is no standard for what support means. Is it no complaints, or repeat business, or an 'outstanding' rating? In this case the job description has left a significant gap in clarifying performance expectations;
- Describes what 'should' be done, not what 'could' be useful. While a boss or customer might have an expectation about performance in a particular area, the job holder might say that if

it is not defined in the job description, their expectations are unrealistic and are not going to be satisfied.

## Meetings With A Difference

- Do you attend meetings that are seemingly called by people with nothing better to do?
- Do the meetings you run zip along like a bullet train?

This is not a section on running meetings, but just to make the point that at some stage in the meeting it is useful to reaffirm what all this planning and reviewing and communicating and accountability setting is about – it's about delivering the team's objectives.

Meetings are more meaningful and motivating if people see that the work they are given responsibility for is making a real difference. Your job as performance leader is to help create that meaning in terms of the group's shared expectations.

## Performance Review

A well designed performance appraisal system (or career development, or performance development or performance review system) will provide opportunities for manager and staff member to agree performance expectations (ideally through goals, since these are the most efficient and effective way to get results), get feedback and understand consequences.

If your system isn't that well designed, all you need to do is bolt some parts on, while keeping the system police happy.

## What Gets Measured...

We know the way this one goes – yes, what gets measured gets managed. I have seen businesses with lots of communication about the customer coming first, and staff being the most important asset, but when it gets down to it – the only numbers that matter are the financials.

Difficulties many businesses have are that:

- The financials are the only thing that gets measured in a system-

atic way;

- So many things are measured it is impossible to tell what matters any more;
- Usually a few measures get most of the attention, so they become the performance expectations by default.

Clearly what gets measured, reported, reviewed, discussed, and rewarded goes a long way to clarifying expectations about what is really important:

- If you are serious about customers – how do you measure their satisfaction and loyalty?
- If you are serious about valuing your people – how do you measure their satisfaction and loyalty?

## Every Opportunity

Are there any other ways for you to reinforce shared expectations? How about the formal communications? What does the staff newsletter say about your company values or goals?

Or the formal recognition systems – are you giving awards for performance that moves you towards where you want to be?

Or the informal communication and recognition approaches – when you congratulate someone on having a happy client, here's the chance to make the point why happy clients are important.

Finally, how many of these approaches (or others) are you using to help the message get through about performance expectations?

- Have you done at least three in the last month?
- How many in the last quarter?
- Considering all the effort you and others are making to communicate – how do you check that the message is received and understood?

There is no substitute for assessing your staff's attitudes and opinions. You can do this in discussion groups or formal surveys.

After you have collected the results of your staff attitudes, you then need to have some further discussions about what your people are telling you. Use this process to help you clarify and reinforce the messages so they hear them.

Never assume that your people understand what is expected of them. Keep asking them – why are you doing this? ☛ET