

The way in which line and middle managers communicate with their staff has a direct impact on how messages are understood and acted upon. To prove this point, Bill Quirke and Dominic Walters look at three companies that have achieved a key business objective simply by coaching managers to interpret messages, provide context and identify the common ground that induces a change in behavior.

# What every manager should know about communication

## Coaching managers to influence behavior through their communication

by Bill Quirke and Dominic Walters

**W**hether at the top of the business or in the middle, there are certain things leaders need to understand how to do. These include how to:

- engage and motivate their people;
- lead their people through change;
- represent the company – especially when they don't necessarily like giving the party line;
- communicate bad news.

Internal communication typically fails to engage middle managers in understanding their roles in communication. A number of companies have been addressing this area specifically and there are valuable lessons to be learned from their work.

One of the lessons is that effective leadership means balancing the “hard task” and “soft relationship” aspects of communication. The task side includes helping employees understand their role and what their efforts mean to the organization and its stakeholders. The relationship

side involves communicating with people in ways that build constructive relationships and make them feel valued and respected.

### Example one: Terminal 5

These two sides of the role were very much at the forefront of Terminal 5's approach to equipping their leaders to communicate.

In London, the construction of Heathrow Airport's fifth terminal by BAA began in 2002. Designed to accommodate 30 million passengers, the £3.7 billion project is reckoned to be one of the largest and most complex construction projects in Europe.

The scale of work is breathtaking and incorporates a range of construction challenges: extensions to the Heathrow Express and London Underground's Piccadilly Line, the building of a new junction on the M25, the re-routing of a river and the boring of a 3.5km overflow tunnel.

To deliver this demanding task, BAA has assembled a virtual organization comprising engineers, contractors and partners. Having assembled a team with some of the best names in the business, T5 faced the challenge of ensuring the effective leadership and co-ordination of an organization that will at the peak of construction work number some 6,000 people.

On the task side, communication had to ensure a clear “line of sight” between the strategic objectives and priorities of the project as a whole and people’s understanding of what they need to do in detail locally. This task focus was balanced by a focus on relationships. The leadership team knew that they needed to create a “one team” feel across the project.

The organization decided to put time into face-to-face communication in order to build relationships with their people, and to create a strong sense among the various team members that their contribution was valued and they were all pulling in the same direction. Line managers were therefore trained in the skills to develop the way they make the connection for their people.

### Key learnings for Terminal 5

Effective communication is not a cascade, but a chain. Companies are increasingly frustrated by the break in the “line of sight” between their strategy and what individuals at the sharp end are expected to do. But often employees don’t see the connection – 50 percent of employees don’t know the strategy but 100 percent think they’re doing a good job.

What businesses want from their communication is an unbroken chain of shared meaning. While the classic cascade passes information from level to level, what organizations actually need are much stronger links between information and its implications, which will differ from department to department and from tier to tier.

### What skills should managers develop?

Line managers must have the skills to understand the likely emotional reactions of their people, to bring rational information to life and to paint a more engaging picture of its meaning.

People enjoy meetings when they get engaged either by solving a problem or having their views aired and heard. The corporate information is rarely enough to excite them. This depends on the team leader’s style, skills and ability to keep energy up and involve people, and encourage cross conversations between team members.

### Example two: Rexam

Line managers often feel unable to expand on or explain messages they are given to communicate. Making that connection stronger and forging links between information and its implications for employees was at the heart of Rexam’s approach to changing its internal communication across its worldwide operations.

**Bill Quirke** is Managing Director of Synopsis Communication Consulting. He is a leading authority on communication and the management of change, and the author of *Communicating Corporate Change* and *Making the Connections*.



**Dominic Walters** is a Senior Consultant at Synopsis. He has worked on a range of projects including major change initiatives, mergers and demergers, developing business linked communication strategies and training and development.



Rexam Plc is one of the world’s largest packaging companies, with 20,000 employees and 110 production sites around the world.

Built from a range of acquisitions in key markets around the world, Rexam rebranded itself to become a unified global company with common approaches and consistent processes.

With customers like Coca Cola, Nescafe and Budweiser, the company was keen for customers to get the same world class standards of service wherever they dealt with Rexam. As importantly, Rexam was keen that the organization was linked by the corporate glue of common values and management style.

The introduction of the “Rexam Way” was designed to create a common culture and to focus managers from a traditional manufacturing background on the broader attitudes and skills needed to attract, develop and retain employees.

Over a year ago, an employee attitude survey designed to test the progress of the Rexam Way identified two key issues as vital to employees – a change in the management style, and greater two-way communication.

To make the connection from top to bottom, Rexam’s HR and corporate communications leaders developed a quarterly process of conversations at global, sector and site levels.

Every employee would get the chance to hear what was going on at their site, how the sector was doing, what was happening at global level and what impact all this might have on them.

Leaders from top to bottom of the organization were trained and communication coaches were trained for each site.

### Key learnings for Rexam

In classic team briefing, the manager adds local items of information. This usually means that there is so much information there’s no time for employees to contribute.

Rexam learned that “less is more” – put less volume of information in, but make sure

- ◀ employees take more out. The manager's job was to turn information into meaning and spell out what the information meant for employees.

Employees often think the communication they receive is boring and irrelevant because it does not answer three key questions:

- Why am I telling you this information ?
- Why should you care?
- What does this mean to you?

As well as “unpacking” the implications of information, leaders also need to be able to communicate issues from the viewpoint of their people. This helps show the overlap in agendas between the leaders and the led.

### **Rexam's key learnings in action**

Part of Rexam's strategy is to reduce its factory capacity so it can focus on high-value work, and to focus on continual improvement in quality, and standardizing its processes.

For plant managers this makes life challenging. They have to engage with their people in improving processes, adopting standards and sharing best practice – while also having to manage downsizing and explain to employees why higher quality is needed at a time when capacity and jobs are being reduced.

Plant managers were asked to pull together groups of employees with the aim of explaining the needs of reducing costs and engaging them in identifying where cost reduction could come from.

The prospect of having to talk to employees yet again about cost-cutting was not appealing.

From the employees view point, being asked to reduce costs at a time when the organization was also likely to be reducing jobs, added insult to injury. However, plant managers learned that both their own automatic concerns and those of their employees were misplaced.

Plant managers learned how to view subjects they wanted to discuss from the employees' point of view. Any agenda item that seemed to be purely for the benefit of the management was unlikely to be warmly embraced.

Plant managers learned to think through the implications of what they wanted to discuss and to look for the shared agenda. What impact would cost reduction have on employees? What were the key areas of cost? How could they reduce costs through better processes rather than simply demanding cuts in budget?

### **Finding the common agenda**

One of the key areas they identified was the cost of printing four-colour images on cans. When

things went wrong in this part of the process it could be costly. As customers wanted to use colourful on-can branding, four colour cans were becoming more common. This was an area likely to produce more headaches for the operators and more costs for the plant manager.

What was it that contributed most to problems in colour registration? Poor performance in the printers, errors in the printer cartridges caused by lack of maintenance in the printer carriages.

What was it that most annoyed operators? Downtime of the printers while they were fixed.

This was a good example of a shared agenda – something that concerned both managers and their crews, although for apparently different reasons. What was the common agenda for both operators and plant managers? Getting better performance out of the printers, which would reduce the irritation for operators and reduce unnecessary cost for plant managers.

How then did plant managers introduce this particular agenda item in their team meetings? Not as cost reduction but as “how to improve the printing process and reduce the frustration of downtime for operators.”

One result of this approach was that employees could see a connection between what was bothering them and what was bothering the company. Encouraged to participate, they then told the manager what they really thought. The more employees feel they can say what they really think, the more likely they are to understand what the organization is trying to do, and the more likely they are to support it. Rexam's training encouraged leader's to smoke out underlying concerns and address them, having learned that employees advocacy comes more from argument than passive acceptance.

### **What skills should managers develop?**

There's a better chance of aligning the business agenda and the employees' agenda if employees don't think managers talk an alien language of shareholder value maximisation and process excellence optimization. Leaders must learn to pull the points out of the Powerpoint and translate it into plain language so they can put it across in their own words.

Typical communication cascades leak meaning. In a cascade process, managers further down the chain become successively less able to add meaning to information. They lose sight of the original impulse behind the information and have less shared understanding of its context.

The absence of any translation and context means either those messages never reach the

bottom of the organization, or if they do, have little meaning or relevance. This kills energy, involvement and feedback.

Managers must be clear about exactly why they are running communication sessions, and the expected and desired outcomes. It's not good enough to simply go through the motions or try and make the best sense of it.

### Example three: Eversheds

Eversheds is one of the largest legal practices in the world, employing over 4,000 people, across 20 offices and associated offices in Europe and Asia.

In the UK, Eversheds became one firm in May 2000 as a result of merging seven large regional practices.

While roadshows and conferences ensured everyone heard consistent messages from the firm's leaders, engaging people in the idea of one firm required more. It needed local managers who were skilled in taking company-wide messages and connecting them with the issues and concerns of local people.

At the same time, employees were asking for more opportunities to discuss what was happening in the firm with their bosses.

Eversheds set up three-monthly face-to-face communication forums called "Have Your Say." A further issue faced was how to promote cross-department cooperation, so senior people were given groups with attendees selected at random.

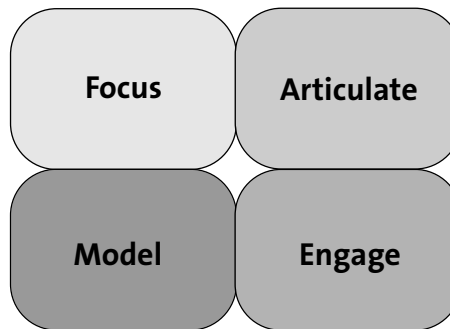
This had several benefits. It allowed local managers to make connections between firm-wide information and the local office, and gave people what they wanted – more time with their local managers. It also brought people from different departments together to discuss key issues. This helped establish understanding across departments, raising knowledge and trust of other areas and encouraging cross-functional working.

This meant people had a clearer idea of what local colleagues do and where they fit together and could add value for clients.

### Key learnings for Eversheds

Leaders can only sell what they own, and ownership comes out of discussion and understanding – which takes time at all levels. For managers to put information in context, they need to get the context themselves. This means giving them a chance to discuss information, unpack its significance and challenge its rationale, before they are asked to

#### FAME: Communication skills for leaders



© Synopsis 2003

**To engage their people, leaders must fulfill four communication responsibilities. Synopsis summarize this using the FAME model:**

**Focus:** Leaders have to bring a clear focus on business issues and set a few clear priorities, which they repeat and reinforce consistently. They should identify clearly what they want employees to think, feel and do to help.

**Articulate:** Leaders have to be able to turn the vision into the elevator speech, paint the picture in more emotional language, turn "management speak" into plain talk, make messages memorable and ensure those messages fit together

**Model:** Senior management have to champion the company values, lead by example, model the right behavior and challenge unacceptable behavior

**Engage:** Leader must add context and make the connection between the organization's agenda and the individuals' agenda. This calls for the ability to listen, facilitate, ask effective questions and to handle the difficulties that inevitably arise when employees speak up.

go and do the same with their people.

Leaders therefore meet with their line bosses to discuss the information they are being asked to communicate, and discuss the local implications for their teams. Each session leader was trained and given the skills required to engage people and get the most out of the sessions.

### What skills should managers develop?

As with the examples above, managers benefited from learning how to place information in context for their audience. The two key skills required revolve around understanding strategies from the top, and learning how to make sense of those strategies for the audience below. scm

#### CONTACT

Bill Quirke

Synopsis Communication Consulting

**e-mail:**

bill@synopsis-communication.co.uk