

Communication breakdown

The fast-changing nature of today's business environment means it is crucial that the lines of communication between management and the shop-floor are effective, trusted and always open, says *Bill Quirke*

The business world is in the midst of a period of unprecedented turbulence. Once this would have been considered wholly negative, but today we are seeing a new model of uncertainty, which is as much about opportunities as threats.

Organisations are specialising, generalising, merging, acquiring, downsizing, expanding and restructuring at an alarming rate. Nothing is certain any more. Today's competitor is tomorrow's ally. The next development in technology could potentially wipe out a whole market overnight or give birth to a total new breed of business.

Add to this the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September and the threat of recession, and it's clear that if businesses are to survive and thrive in these challenging times, they need to become more agile and responsive.

Used strategically, communication is the cement that will bind the organisation together and ensure people's energies are focused in the right direction. But the mixture – and the application – needs to be right.

A new style of communication with employees must be developed – one that is less about directing and more about engaging with people. Yet many organisations are trapped in a time warp, using a style of communication that is more suited to the production lines of the 1970s than to the fast and flexible companies of today.

Businesses need to help employees find their way through the increasing mass of information heaped upon them so they can focus on what's really important. They must refine the way they use technology to communicate, to ensure the medium doesn't cloud the

message. They have to find new ways of helping employees build relationships and share knowledge – often over distance and with people they may never have met and will work with only for a short time.

UNCERTAINTY IS WORSE THAN BAD NEWS

How often does this happen in organisations? Change is coming, so senior managers spend hours locked in the boardroom refining their objectives, considering options and evaluating solutions. They then 'announce' their conclusions – and expect everyone to march meekly in the right direction.

'In times of change, people are more stressed by uncertainty than by bad news'

The reality, however, is that in times of uncertainty, organisations need more than just compliance from employees. They need to engage people's hearts and minds, gain their energy and commitment and get them focusing their efforts in the right direction.

One of the first steps to doing this is to recognise the need to 'share the thinking'. In times of change, people are more stressed by uncertainty than by bad news. They are hungry for information about rationale, options, possible scenarios and implications. They also, naturally, want to know how it will affect them personally and what the organisation needs them to do differently in the new scenario.

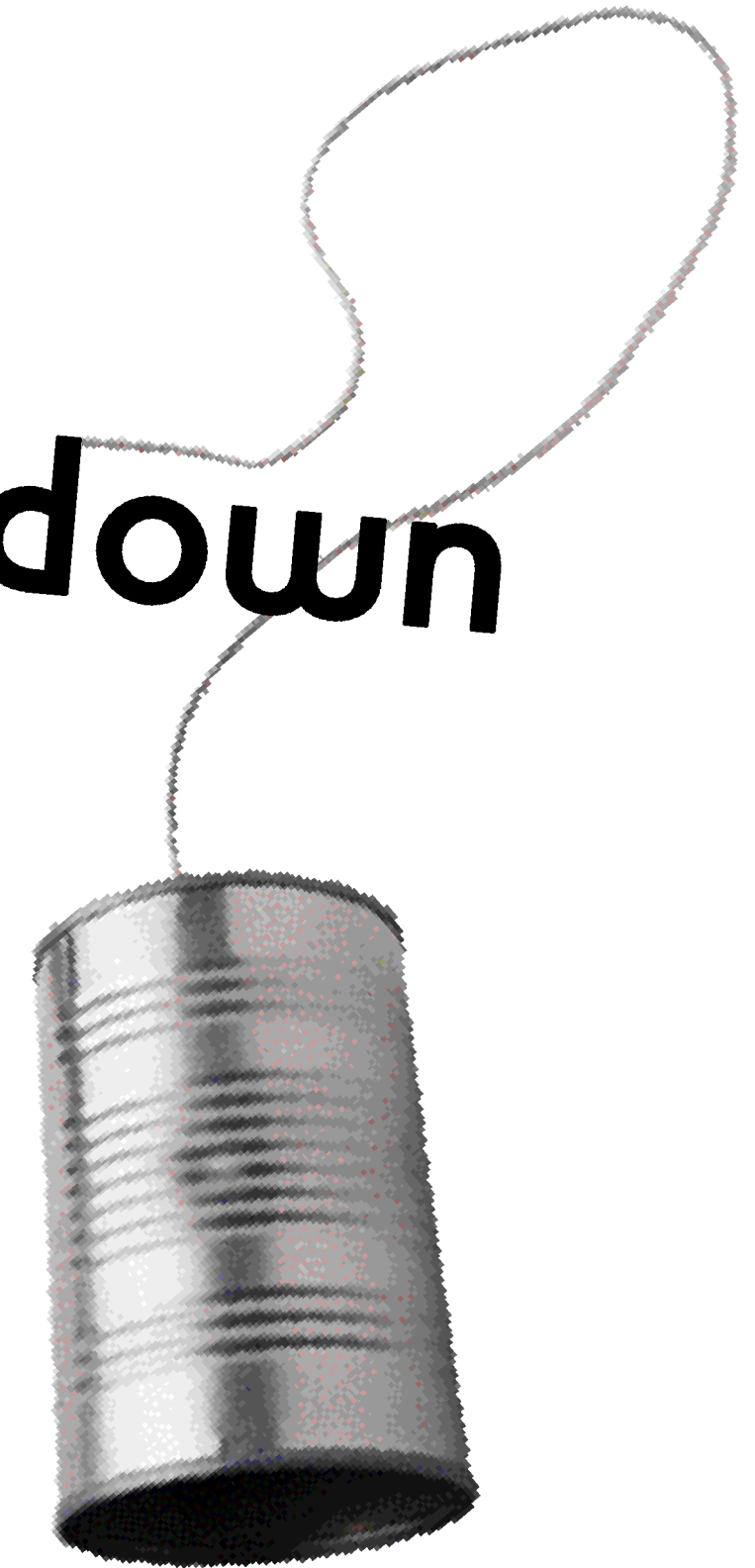
Unfortunately, organisations in turmoil often want to keep their heads down and restrict information. This may be because leaders are not clear themselves about what's going on, or what stance they should take, or because they are worried about disclosing confidential information. But even if you can't give people absolutes, you need at least to help them understand the context, appreciate how fast things are changing and give them a sense of the direction in which things might be heading.

If people understand the bigger organisational picture they will be more willing to stay for the ride and more motivated to do the job you need them to do. If they understand the specific role they need to play, they will be better equipped to make decisions and more willing to share knowledge and information with their colleagues.

If information is withheld, speculation and gossip will be rife and trust in management will be quickly eroded, at the very time you need everyone to be 'on side'. Equally, if employees only have half the picture, they may waste time and effort focusing their energies in completely the wrong direction.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE EFFECTIVELY

Different types of change require a different communication approach. Engaging employees in a major culture change programme, for example, calls for a different approach to gearing people up for a short-term campaign. It is also important to recognise that people will move through the change process at a different pace and will have different levels of anxiety. There are, however, some broad principles that are useful:



Create a sense of urgency

■ If employees are mistakenly feeling 'fat and happy', they need to be re-educated. They need to be taken to the 'top of the strategic mountain' and shown the oncoming threat to continued survival.

In other words, employees have to go through the same thought and learning process that senior management have been through. A shared sense of urgency comes from a shared understanding of the business threats.

Communicate the big picture

■ Employees need to understand the business environment they are operating in.

Some leading companies have recognised this and responded by trying to create greater business literacy among their staff, educating them about the market and keeping them up-to-date with consumer trends and changes in competition. Armed with this knowledge, employees will understand the likely implications for themselves and their job and will be better equipped to make decisions.

Share thinking as well as conclusions

■ When people are uncertain and question the competence and the credibility of their managers, it is more important than ever to share thinking.

Change will not be properly understood, let alone implemented, unless people understand why it is necessary. Commitment comes from a sense of ownership, and ownership comes from participation. People need to be actively involved in discussing how the change can be implemented in their area.

Say what's on their mind, not what is on yours

■ In times of uncertainty, credibility comes from being willing to acknowledge what people are already thinking. This accelerates the pace at which people will engage with senior management, energises people because they feel they can say what they think, and makes it more likely that you will flush out unexpected barriers to implementation.

Maximise the sense of continuity and stability

■ If change is sold as 'revolution', it can seem too extreme and sudden for people to cope with. Employees see it as violating their traditional values and will resist and cling to existing work patterns. What they really want is to maintain continuity where possible, make it through the change with as little disruption as possible and quickly re-establish equilibrium. Positioning change as evolutionary will therefore help reassure people and make them feel there is continuity with the past.

Do not wait

■ Even in the most uncertain of situations, there is always something that can be communicated. Managers often mistakenly assume that they are in control of communication and can turn it on and off like a tap.

Unfortunately, if management does not communicate, the grapevine will. The key is to be proactive and manage

HOW STRATEGIC POSITIONING FAILS

Senior managers in a European manufacturing company were becoming increasingly frustrated at the failure of production workers to appreciate the true competitiveness of the market they were in. Most board members believed that customer satisfaction with their products was low, while a significant number of first line supervisors had a different perception, and thought customer satisfaction was fine.

These supervisors reassured their teams that everything was well – defeating the board's efforts to issue a wake-up call to the workforce. The 'disconnect' was entirely due to a failure to discuss information and educate people about its implications

communication, rather than having to react to the latest rumour.

Communicate probabilities and scenarios

■ While you cannot predict the future, you can talk about what might happen. People will speculate anyway, so you may as well give them real possibilities to think about. It is also helpful to give people a timescale of when you expect to be able to communicate specific information. Low-key management briefings are a good way to talk about possible scenarios and allow employees to ask questions and discuss the possible implications.

Make face-to-face the main channel

■ Research has shown that people prefer to receive information about change from their immediate manager, face to face. Line managers are often perceived as being 'in the same boat' as their teams. They can help their people 'unpack' information and make the connection to their day-to-day jobs. If you communicate in this way, you will be better able to assess people's concerns, correct misconceptions, gather feedback and minimise the chances of sensitive details being leaked.

Train managers in new skills

■ Managers are traditionally good at presenting information, rebutting challenges and winning the argument. Communicating change, however, calls for a different set of skills. Managers need to be able to listen, debate and connect on the right emotional level with their staff. They need to be able to use vivid language and make information come alive.

Invest enough time

■ Communication is a process, not an event. It is unrealistic to expect that a shared conclusion will be reached on the first attempt. Communicating change successfully means listening to people, allowing them to test your position, helping them to share the thinking and process the information – and then trying again.

CHALLENGES FOR GLOBAL ORGANISATIONS

Global organisations have a more complicated challenge than most. They manage across different time zones,

making it difficult to manage information and update employees at the same time.

Management styles in different countries mean managers have conflicting ideas about what is confidential and what is appropriate to share with employees. Different countries also have varying degrees of legal constraint about what organisations can and cannot communicate to employees.

Different organisations have different degrees of cultural 'permission' to raise issues and explore concerns. Europeans, for example, can find that raising doubts about the future can be seen as overly negative by US colleagues.

Organisations will have communication channels of varying quality – some parts of the organisation may be effectively wired up for e-mail and webcasts, other countries may be difficult to contact and have far less access to IT.

The logistics and timing involved in translating information adds complications and time. Fast translations of central information are notoriously tricky – management in the Russian office of one global organisation translated the key phrase 'your line manager' to 'your prison warder'.

The relationship between corporate centres and their operating units can have a huge effect on managing communication. Operations that regard the centre as a costly and unnecessary hindrance often fall into the habit of filtering out information coming from corporate centre. Those in the operating units are then happily unaware of changes until it is too late.

Managing communication in these kind of organisations means getting strong linkage between the corporate centre and then operating units, and clear rules of engagement about who is communicating what to whom.

PULLING COMMUNICATION TOGETHER

Following the above steps is not enough in itself. Communication needs to be coherent – people need to hear the right information, understand it, and be able to act on it. Using the following processes is a good start:

Involve senior management

■ Research has shown that 69 per cent of Fortune 100

HOW STRATEGIC POSITIONING WINS

Abbey National, a major UK bank, introduced an 'air traffic control' communication system that it believes helped it in a time of major change – fighting off a hostile takeover bid from global giant Lloyds TSB. Abbey National's head of communications Neil Fraser-Smith, says: "It would have been very easy to have been sidetracked into rubbishing the other company, but a highly-co-ordinated approach to internal communications helped us focus on messages about what the impact of a takeover would be on innovation, customer service and choice. This fitted with our external communication strategy as well – and in the end, won the day."

companies do not have a communication policy. A recent Synopsis survey suggests that where there is a communication strategy, only one-third of boards are involved in formulating or approving it.

'Road test' communications

■ In times of uncertainty, employees are more likely to misinterpret the information they are given. There is therefore a far greater need for managers to 'road test' the message before it is issued to ensure they flush out any possible misconceptions and misunderstandings.

Plan ahead

■ Communication planning should involve senior management and focus on business objectives. Organisations need to develop an annual calendar of communication events and milestones, which is linked to the business plan and reviewed at regular intervals.

Map attitudes and audiences

■ Organisations need to look at who is affected by the change, gather information about their current perceptions and think about exactly what it is they need to know. In any period of change there will be different audiences with different communication needs. Some will need a 'wake up call', for example, while others may simply need education or reassurance.

Co-ordinate

■ If those responsible for internal communication do not co-ordinate their efforts, they will compete for employees' time and attention and cause 'communication clutter'. Different functions, such as HR, corporate communications, IT and marketing, need to work together and share thinking, plans and priorities.

Practice 'air traffic control'

■ Organisations need to adopt a more sophisticated approach to managing communication if they are to avoid the problem of information overload. They need to shift from the 'factory' method of pumping more and more messages down communication pipelines, to 'air traffic control', where information is planned and prioritised.

Use measurement and tracking

■ Feedback becomes more important in times of uncertainty, because employees are more likely to misinterpret information. Organisations need frequently to check that the right messages are getting across by setting up feedback 'loops' (via line managers, intranets and e-mail) and organising regular focus groups and tracking surveys.

Focus groups should be used not simply to check whether the message is getting across, but how people are decoding it. This is important for two reasons – it alerts senior management to where there are misinterpretations, and where the message is not believed, so signalling to them that they have to get straighter in their talk and more willing to acknowledge what's on people's minds.

The Synopsis Report *Communicating in Uncertainty* can be downloaded from www.synopsis-communication.co.uk

Bill Quirke is managing director of Synopsis Communications Consulting. Before founding Synopsis, he was a director of Burson Marsteller. He is a regular international speaker, and is the author of numerous works on internal communication, including *Communicating Corporate Change*, published by McGraw Hill