Keep Your People Informed

By Ben Baran, Ph.D., Agility Analytics Practice Leader

By nature, we humans continually seek to reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity around us. We're all different to some degree, of course, but we generally like to know what to expect each day, and we like to have clarity about what's going on.

As a result, we're information seekers.

We look for cues in what people say and how they act. We try to figure out what's important and what's not important in part through the words and actions of others.

And when we don't have much information to go on—for example, when our direct supervisors don't communicate with us on a regular basis—we tend to fill in the gaps.

We guess.

We assume.

We interpret—and sometimes contribute to—rumors among our peers. We do our best to reduce our own uncertainty and ambiguity. Sometimes that works.

Sometimes it doesn't.

That's why keeping your people informed—number four of 11 in the list of the U.S. Navy's Leadership Principles—is so critical to being a high-quality leader and manager.

In my experience, both firsthand and in working with other leaders, managers and those who report to them, it's easy to fall into some variation of the three types below when it comes to keeping their direct reports informed.

Three Common Approaches to Keeping Your People Informed

Type 1: The Quiet Majority

Many leaders and managers fall into this category, but they probably don't realize it. But if you ask their people, they'll likely be quick to say that they don't hear enough from their supervisors or other leaders. The Quiet Majority comprises those leaders and managers who think that they're communicating enough with their direct reports. They share a few updates when they deem it necessary; they provide comments and direction at staff meetings. By many accounts, they're doing OK. The problem is that they simply aren't communicating enough or through enough channels simultaneously to make their people

(a) feel involved, (b) understand how they fit into what the team or organization is trying to achieve overall or (c) have enough of an idea about what could happen in the future to anticipate and plan accordingly.

Type 2: The Firehose

Firehose leaders and managers are on the opposite end of the communication spectrum from the Quiet Majority. They, often under the best of intentions, provide an excessive amount of information to their people. This may come in the form of excessively numerous forwarded e-mails, long meetings or phone calls that come so frequently that they become a serious distraction and hassle. A frequent result is that people start ignoring information that's provided because it appears to them that there is no clear prioritization of the communication they're receiving.

Type 3: The Data Bomber

Some other leaders and managers are what I like to call "Data Bombers." These people may be part of the Quiet Majority for some periods, but then they sporadically subject their people to a deluge of information. Whereas the Firehoses maintain a continual stream of excessive information, the Data Bombers do so in a more punctuated fashion. A potential result of data bombing your people is that they'll get confused about what pieces of information are truly important and which ones are not, as they'll have limited ability to sort through the data bombs as they arrive. Other employees may set aside their current priorities to sort through the data bomb and make sense of it, potentially resulting in delays in making progress on their projects.

A Better Way

It's tough, but keeping your people informed can be more effective if you consider a few of the following:

1   Assess your communication. Many of the people in the Quiet Majority think that they're communicating enough with their direct reports, but their direct reports think otherwise. You can find this out through a simple anonymous survey, supplemented perhaps by directly asking a sample of your people. Ask them if they're receiving enough communication from you about the strategic direction of the team or organization, about potential changes that affect their work and about personnel-related matters. Also ask about their preferred channels of communication —e.g., your use of e-mail, meetings, memos, phone calls or others ways of passing along information.

2   To avoid becoming a Firehose, actively consolidate, summarize or interpret information prior to sending it to everyone. If you're forwarding information to your people via e-mail, consider including a sentence at the beginning that states the people to whom the information most closely applies. Is it everyone, or just a few specialists? Also, keep in mind that when you treat everything as news, nothing is news. So it behooves you to be selective in what you choose to pass along to your people.

3   Whenever you encounter a new piece of information that affects what your team does or what some of your direct reports do, ask yourself the following questions: (1) What do I know?, (2) Who else needs to know?, (3) Have I told them? If you apply these rules consistently, you'll avoid having a large backlog of information that will require you to deliver a data bomb.

Clearly, keeping your people informed is an art that you'll need to hone continually depending on the information you receive, the nature of your team and the preferences of your direct reports. There's no

magical solution, but by assessing your communication practices on a regular basis and actively working to help reduce uncertainty and ambiguity as appropriate through your communication, you'll be on the right track.

This post is one in a series that I'm doing on all 11 of the U.S. Navy's Leadership Principles. Here are all 11 of those principles:

1   Know yourself and seek self-improvement (read more)
2   Be technically and tactically proficient (read more)
3   Know your people and look out for their welfare (read more)
4   **Keep your people informed**
5   Set the example
6   Make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished
7   Train your unit as a team
8   Make sound and timely decisions
9   Develop a sense of responsibility among your people
10 Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities
11 Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions

Find this thought provoking? Leave a comment, like and share!

Ben Baran, Ph.D.

Agility Analytics Practice Leader

ben@agilityconsulting.com