A Communicator's Dream Come True

Two years ago, Anne Curley was told to do whatever it took to create a great employee communication program for S.C. Johnson. She embarked on a three-month tour of the best communication departments in the country and, when she returned, constructed a communication function around the 10 major concepts she learned.

I WOULD LIKE YOU TO IMAGINE SOMETHING FOR A MOMENT. You have spent the last number of years working in a communication department where you had broad responsibility for a wide range of communication activities. Every day, your main challenge was to keep your head above water as you juggled multiple time-sensitive priorities.

Are you having a hard time imagining this? I didn't think so.

Then imagine that, one day, a new employer comes along who says they want you to join them and focus for a while on one thing and only one thing – building a "world-class" internal communication function. You tell them that, in your old job, you were spread a mile wide and an inch deep and you didn't have the luxury of knowing everything there was to know about internal communication. You say if that's what they really want, you'd need to spend your first three months on the job educating yourself – traveling to the companies that do it best, interviewing the field's leading thinkers, reading everything you can get your hands on – and then turning all that insight into a comprehensive plan. Just imagine what it would be like if they said…OK!

That probably gets a lot harder for most people to imagine. But it happened to me a while back. In 1997, I went to work for SC Johnson, maker of Windex, Pledge, Ziploc, Glade, Raid, Scrubbing Bubbles and dozens of other household products. Before most folks even knew I was there, I had spent an exciting, re-energizing three months learning what there was to learn about strategic workplace communication.

Several outstanding corporate communication departments opened their doors to me, including Amoco, Duke, Energy, Eastman Kodak, Hewlett-Packard, Levi-Strauss, Nortel, United Airlines, USG, Hallmark Cards and Federal Express. I also met with employee communication practice leaders at Watson Wyatt and Hill & Knowlton.

Before sharing the highlights of this research, a bit of background is in order for readers who may wonder why a company would give someone carte blanche to revamp their internal communication systems. In the case of SC Johnson, there were two main reasons.

First, we wanted to improve the sense of trust, respect, and fairness experienced by employees at our workplace. By all objective measures, SC Johnson is one of the most stand-up, employee-friendly companies in the nation. Maintaining a high-trust environment characterized by fairness and mutual respect is very important to Johnson leaders. Toward that end, they wanted a more robust communication climate.

Second, our leadership realized that in today's economy – whether you call it an Information Economy, a Knowledge Economy or the Network Economy – the companies

that share information most effectively will have a competitive advantage. This is a real paradigm shift for many managers.

The Industrial Age organization model is strongly hierarchical, bureaucratic, rigid…built to last. It's authoritarian – command and control – and the business challenge tends to be producer-driven…who can produce the most widgets at the least cost? Here, things change slowly, and there's no perceived need for participative management. So it works for communication to be top-down, one-way, mass-produced, carefully controlled and sender-driven. "We'll tell you what we want to tell you when we feel you need to know."

In the Knowledge Economy, another model prevails – a much more network-like, flexible, participative, customer-driven model. Here, communication is distributive vs. centralized. It's interactive – for the sake of both speed and idea sharing. It's customizable and receiver-driven, a la PointCast. The information user decides what information is relevant and controls the flow accordingly.

In short, the stars of today's wired economy facilitate easy, quick access to information. They err on the side of sharing vs. hoarding facts and ideas, so they can encourage employees to build on each other's knowledge. In the words of the folks at Levi-Strauss, the burning question is, "How fast can you leverage your learnings?"

I think you could make a good case that much of the job stress that we and our employees are feeling mirrors the organizational stress that comes when you shift from the paradigm on the left to the one on the right. Like many other corporations, we are working very hard to be a "network economy star" while still engaging in many Industrial Age ways of operating. Strategic communication can help get us past this paradox.

Those were the two drivers behind our new communication strategy, and behind management's decision to give me a chance to study employee communication so deeply. Now let me tell you what I learned from all these companies, by sharing the 10 key principles that underlie the communication program we eventually developed:

1. The best communication is always receiver-based. Of all the ideas I pondered, this seemed by far the most powerful. The communication process should always begin with a good understanding of where the receiver is coming from. We need to reflect on the intended receiver's values, perceptions, information needs, and level of interest and understanding. Then we can communicate in a way that will fit the receiver's frame of reference.

Baldly stated, it doesn't matter what we want them to know and believe; what matters is what they will perceive to be *relevant* and *credible*. A great deal of our organizational communication is marginally effective at best – and, at times, downright counterproductive – because it is not receiver based.

You probably knew this already. But do you consistently begin every communication process by thinking first, "Who's my audience?" and only second, "What do I want to say to them?"

2. The purpose of workplace communication is to enhance job performance. It's not to boost morale or build corporate culture. Those are key by-products, but if you make them your primary focus you probably won't accomplish them. To be sustainable,

good morale and a good corporate culture need to be rooted in performance. So the focus of all our communication efforts should be to improve performance.

This doesn't mean good communication is all strictly job-related. For example, we need to communicate about employee benefits. But the reason we need to communicate about that is that people need to feel comfortable with their benefits program to perform at their best. Effective workplace communication shouldn't include much information that is simply interesting. There should almost always be some link to performance. So let's call what we're striving for "performance-focused communication."

3. Performance-focused communication meets a hierarchy of needs. We have created a model that stands at the heart of our employee communication program. It represents a hierarchy of the communication needs that every employee has. I know it will be familiar to many of you. Similar models are used by Amoco, Nortel, and consultant Tom Lee, among others. They all bear a strong resemblance to behavior change models used by psychologists. We have built an entire communication training program around this model, delivering eight hours of training to 277 managers during the past 12 months.

At the base is simple **awareness**. Here we're saying, "I was exposed to the information and it registered at some level in my mind." As we all know, clearing even this communication hurdle has become increasingly challenging. There are two keys to attaining awareness. The first is *relevance*, the foundation of all good communication. This gets back to the idea of receiver-based communication. If you want to gain awareness, make the "So what?" angle very clear. Organize the information to help people make quick judgments about its usefulness to them. This can be as simple as writing a clear headline or as complex as developing a user-focused information architecture for your intranet.

The second, related key to awareness is *simplicity*. If you want something to register, keep it simple. Distill, distill, distill until you've got it down to the essential few thoughts.

Next comes **understanding**. If we're successful at this communication level, it means employees have correctly interpreted the meaning of the message. If a subject is complex, we must clear this level of the model. Here, to concepts are key: *clarity* and *dialog*.

We remind our managers that, in order to achieve crystal clarity, they must communicate in more than one way, since we don't all process information the same way. In our training, we use an anagram called "C.L.E.A.R." which encourages them to use context, links to the receiver, examples, analogies, and representative pictures to get the message across. We stress that managers must strive fiercely for absolute clarity of meaning, with zero tolerance for anything less. We communicators can add tremendous value in this regard. If we create an expectation that decisions and concepts will be communicated with crystal clarity, that means the thinking behind them must be crystal clear, too. And sometimes it doesn't start out that way.

Second, we emphasize that they will never know if they have actually achieved understanding unless they provide an opportunity for dialog. As we all know, the goal is

to create an atmosphere where people feel very free to speak up when they don't understand – or when they think that management doesn't understand.

Sometimes, achieving understanding is the end goal. Other times, we need to continue climbing the model to the next level: **belief.** As an example, an employee might understand the principles outlined in your mission statement. But they might not believe those are the principles your organization actually lives by.

The main key to winning belief is *evidence*. We have got to help our management lose the idea that they can win belief simply by asserting that something is true or good. Sure, if you've built up a reservoir of trust, you can get people to accept what you say on faith. But it is far better, whenever possible, to show employees the facts and logic behind our assertions and decisions.

One kind of evidence we can use involves external reference points. Two quick examples:

Several years ago, General Motors was having a terrible time with quality control in one of its paint shops. Within a few years of purchasing a car, customers were complaining that paint was flaking off. The paint shop supervisor nagged and nagged about the importance of precision in formulating the paint, to no avail. Then one day he brought in two five-year-old car doors, one from a GM car and one made by a competitor. The GM paint job was obviously inferior. And suddenly the problem became real for these employees. It became a matter of pride. It was on its way to being fixed.

Here's another example: Rubbermaid held a product fair for its employees – a product fair with a twist. Next to each Rubbermaid product was a comparable item made by a competitor, with suggested retail prices listed for both. Much to the surprise of many employees – who for years had bought all their storage products at the company store – the quality of competing products had come a long way over the years. And the prices were consistently lower than Rubbermaid's.

The CEO could have talked ad nauseum about the need to cut operating costs, and it would have sounded like the "same old, same old" to employees. Now, suddenly, the issue was real.

"Transparent logic" can be another compelling form of evidence. The term was created by PR guru Pat Jackson, who notes that, more often than not, the logic behind major corporate decisions is anything *but* transparent to employees. Indeed, one of the biggest communication problems we have is that managers too often make assertions instead of laying out their logic. "We are confident that our future will be bright." "We have turned the corner." "The change in our pension plan will make it more equitable." "Everyone wins under our new health program." "We would not make this change unless it were absolutely necessary…"Yeah, sure, right, uh huh.

Here's a contrasting example: In my former job, I worked at Firstar Corporation, a Midwestern financial service company. The company announced in 1996 that it was entering into a planning process that would result in a substantial staff reduction. On the CEO voicemail hotline that we set up, our chairman got a call from an employee asking, "Should I be looking for another job?" A pretty obvious question, right? Well, instead of just asserting that she should hang in there, here's what he said:

"It's only natural to wonder whether you should jump ship before you get pushed overboard. But let's think this through together. First of all, the odds are good that you

will not lose your job. Second, where would you go to find a 100 percent employment guarantee? Even government jobs don't offer ironclad security anymore. Third, there are *lots* of places you could go that don't treat their people as well as Firstar does. This company isn't perfect, but it's a decent and fair employer. And that should count for a lot as you weigh your options. For these reasons, I sincerely believe that it is in your best interest – and the best interest of all our employees – to stay here and stay focused."

By laying out the reasoning behind his assertion, this leader allowed employees to understand the logic train and decide for themselves if it held together. The day this response was published, I overheard someone in the cafeteria say, "I don't like this waiting game, but I can't argue with his logic." And that's exactly the point.

If we can win belief – in our vision, our stated values, our business plans – the next hurdle we sometimes must clear is **commitment.** An employee may say, "I believe you can do what you say. I believe you can get where you say you want to go. I'm just not excited about going there with you. That's *your* vision, not *my* vision."

At this level, we get into a variety of side issues such as compensation and career management that are beyond the scope of pure communication. But the most important driver here is something communicators can influence: employee involvement. To the extent that we can facilitate an environment where employees are encouraged to contribute ideas, challenge ideas, and build on each other's ideas, they become co-creators of the organization's future. And they gain a sense of commitment.

The final challenge is to translate employee commitment into optimal performance. Here we are talking classic performance management, which is beyond the scope of this discussion.

The "Johnson Pyramid," a model that depicts this communication hierarchy, is the centerpiece of our strategic communication plan.

It is the framework for our communication training. It is the tool that we use when consulting with managers about their communication issues, and the tool they are using to develop their own communication plans. As an aside, I cannot overemphasize the importance of operating within the context of a model. Edward Deming, father of the Total Quality Movement, once said, "Without a model, there is no learning." In putting together this communication program, I came to understand the wisdom of this thought.

4. Each level of management has a different communication role to play. In communicating with employees in general, the CEO should be the standard bearer for the critical few values and priorities that must be consistent throughout the organization. The role of top management is to communicate the big picture. Where are we headed? Why? How will we get there, broadly speaking? What's in it for us? Their messages to the troops should be simple and clear.

Middle management's role is to reinforce those critical few ideas coming from above. In addition, they must layer on the context that makes those messages meaningful for their part of the company. Very importantly, they need to translate the big ideas into clear business priorities that guide decisions on how to allocate time and money. And they need to communicate and enforce those priorities very consistently. Otherwise, they're sending mixed messages.

Supervisors then use this information to align the daily work of employees with the business's goals and priorities. Supervisors should be echoing the broad themes laid

out by senior management. They should be explaining how these broad themes connect with their division's priorities, and how the priorities relate to the local work group.

       5. Local frame of reference matters most. The communication that occurs between supervisor and employee is by far more influential than any other level of communication. While most employees have some desire to understand the big picture, they have a much greater need to understand the dynamics of their own performance and work group.

       I was at a conference several months ago, sitting next to a communicator from a conglomerate that owns a variety of disparate businesses. He was telling me that this conglomerate was about to launch a communication campaign to get employees from all the different subsidiaries to identify more strongly with the holding company. Why? What's the point? How will that improve their performance?

       I am told that Federal Express takes just the opposite approach. Top management there realizes that employees throughout the world experience drastically different realities on a daily basis. A FedEx office in Southern India has a dirt floor. The one in downtown Paris is trés elegante.

       The primary goal at this company is to give local supervisors the authority and information they need to *be* the corporate voice of FedEx to their employees, and to customize that voice so it resonates with the local work force.

       6. By far the most preferred and influential source of information is the direct supervisor. You know how surveys show that lots of people distrust Congress, but like their own congressional representative? We see the same principle in the workplace. Often, employees who say they distrust "management" have relatively high trust in their own boss. And, of course, if an employee does *not* trust his or her boss, no other level of management can make up for it.

       Oftentimes, top management actually undercuts middle and lower management by failing to give them the information they need in order to *be* the primary source for their people. How often does it happen that, when a big announcement gets made, the middle manager and supervisor find out about it at exactly the same time and in the same way as all employees? Whenever possible, we should give these leaders some advance notice, even if it's just a matter of minutes ahead of the general announcement, and provide additional background information regarding major developments.

       At some companies, top management goes so far as to take the middle folks out of the picture altogether. In the April 1998 issue of *Fast Company* magazine, there's a piece on how you get people to be truthful at work. The CEO of Marshall Industries is quoted as saying that he holds monthly forums with employees where "no managers are allowed" – except him, apparently. He says, "I start every meeting by saying something like, 'This is your company. Tell me what's wrong with it.'"

       As I am reading this, I am thinking, "I'll tell you what's wrong with it. You're undercutting your own managers."

       Sure, it's hard for employees to be honest in front of their bosses sometimes, and I understand the limitations of cascading. But the solution isn't to cut the boss out of the loop. What I am talking about here does not involve a multi-tiered cascade process. It

simply targets all supervisory personnel with a little advance notice and additional background information whenever possible.

7. Feedback loops are critical. You know it, I know it: A good communication system includes plenty of feedback loops. In addition to employee surveys, these can include simple things, such as: asking employees before a meeting what topics they'd like to see covered; always building in time for Q&A, and throwing out the first tough question yourself if necessary; surveying employees after a meeting to see how they felt it went and what you might do differently the next time.

These techniques help create an atmosphere of openness. They generate valuable business information. And they help us keep a finger on the pulse of the organization. We all know this; My only point is that we should become absolutely slavish about building some kind of feedback loop into just about everything we do.

8. The best workplace communication is almost always linked in some way to the *marketplace*. When we are asking employees to buy a new idea or a change, we should draw a clear link between what we're asking them to do and some meaningful marketplace reality. This might involve a competitive challenge. It could relate to a consumer trend or customer requirement. If the issue is employee benefits, it might entail comparative data from other local employers.

The key is to show that the change or idea springs from something real, as opposed to the latest management fad. Roger D' Aprix's book *Communicating for Change* does a great job of discussing this type of market-based communication.

Finally, two underlying principles that relate to both good communication and good management:

9. Clear priorities are a cornerstone of good workplace communication. The manager's role is to establish, communicate, and enforce priorities. Creating a sense of urgency without adhering to clear priorities wastes energy and promotes burnout. Change management gurus tell us we've got to learn to deal with ambiguity. But in a high-performance environment, only *necessary* ambiguity is tolerated. In the best-performing organizations, people constantly strive for that clarity I talked about earlier so that resources can be properly aligned. The ideal that we are working toward is a communication climate where leaders work with their teams to establish clear, achievable priorities – and one where people are encouraged to raise a concern when they don't see how a given activity relates to the stated priorities.

Perhaps you are thinking, "But I can't control the priority-setting process of other managers." I would argue that, where the process is inconsistent or weak, we *can* have influence by establishing communication metrics that gauge whether employees understand the priorities of their division and work group. For example, Federal Express has developed a "Communication Climate Index," a survey instrument that measures, among other things, employees' understanding of business priorities.

10. Relationships drive results. Consistency builds relationships. Whether we call it a Knowledge Economy, Information Economy, or Network Economy, we have moved into an era where the scarcest and most valued resource is smart, committed

people. And when you look at what turns these people on – people like you, who care enough to read this article – it typically goes beyond compensation, beyond employee benefits, beyond all the external motivators…to a deep desire to be engaged in a productive relationship with other smart, committed people.

So how do we nurture this type of "relationship culture?" My research suggest that the most important key is to strive constantly for *internal consistency*. Those of you who have had Covey training are very familiar with this logic. It goes like this: The key to relationships is trust; the key to trust is credibility; the key to credibility is consistency. This consistency arises from tight alignment on vision, values, and key objectives at the top; clear, achievable priorities in the middle; and open information sharing and dialog at the work-group level.

In conclusion…
Even in this age of stress and burnout, there remains tremendous potential for increasing the productivity and satisfaction of our workforce. Like a rich, undiscovered oil field, there exists a great reserve of employee commitment that remains untapped for lack of relevant, clear, persuasive, involving communication. You and I are the keepers of the tools that can help tap this potential. I can't think of a worthier calling.