In The Absence Of Information They Will Make It Up

When an organization is going through change the need for communicating information about what is going on in the organization goes up significantly. Often the tendency is to withhold information either to protect employees or to prevent excessive talk around the water cooler that can put a dent in productivity.

However this approach usually backfires.
Employees create their own version of what’s happening and they talk about that around the water cooler. Here’s an example:

**Management Thinks**
- It’s too early to tell them.
- Our strategy is not fully clear yet. Best not to confuse the employees.
- I don’t know if we can trust them with sensitive business information.

**Employees Think**
- Silence must mean it’s pretty bad.
- We must not have a strategy.
- Management must not trust us with sensitive business information.

From Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em by Kaye and Jordan Evans

**The Listening Factor**
Communication of course is a two way street. In addition to receiving critical information, key employees need to feel that they are being listened to and that their needs and issues are being heard and understood. This is what Phil Harkins of Linkage calls “The Listening Factor”:

“Key employees need to believe that they are being listened to. This is perhaps the most frequently cited reason why departing employees leave an organization—they believe they are not being heard. Communication and failure to say exactly what is needed . . . become blockers and hurdles that tire out employees and end in final statements like, ‘It isn’t worth it any more.’”

As a manager, listening is one of those things that seems simple and intuitive but not always so easy to apply. Here are two simple rules for listening with your employees that, if you keep them, can make life easy. If you break them on a consistent basis you’re headed for trouble.

**Rule #1: Diagnose Before You Prescribe**
The first rule seems simple: Diagnose Before You Prescribe. It’s also a fundamental rule of so many disciplines. If you’re a doctor prescribing medication you obviously need to diagnose before you prescribe. If you are an instructor, you need to understand what level of understanding or skill your audience has before you begin to teach anything. If you’re a lawyer, you want to understand your opponent’s brief as well as your own before you ever enter the courtroom. If you are a design engineer you need to understand the customer requirements before you draw your first schematic.

Many of us however don’t do this well in discussions with our direct reports. Instead we sometimes prescribe before we diagnose. One manager reports that if he doesn’t catch himself, when listening to a problem or issue from one of his employees, that the
first words out of his mouth are,

“Why don’t you just__________.”

He’s already solving the problem with what seems to him to be the easiest and most straightforward solution. He’s already decided that this is “Excedrin Headache #23.”

Statements like “I know just what you mean” or “That’s just like a problem I had one time” too early in the conversation are a way of diagnosing before you prescribe.

Rule #2: Listen With The Intent To Understand

Again this is more easily said than done and is not our first inclination. Instead of listening with the intent to understand, most of us have the tendency to listen with the intent to reply, or to evaluate, critique, advise, rebut, agree or disagree. This is called autobiographical listening—the tendency to filter information that we receive based on our own frame of reference and experience.

Rather, the effective listener has the ability to turn off his or her autobiography and simply

They Said It...

Most of us listen auto-biographically. We read chapters two and three of our own autobiography as we listen, injecting our own experience, our own biases and our own frame of reference rather than just listening to what the other person has to say. We project ourselves onto the other person. It’s like we’re running our own home movies as we listen.

—Stephen Covey

Supervision ≠ Super Vision

Some assume that because they carry the title of “supervisor” that this means they have super vision. They have all the answers. This attitude of course leads to problems and to giving your employees the feeling that you are not listening. If you take this approach with a high performer, he or she will find another opportunity where they can better ply their skills and have a more equal relationship with their manager.

Human Synergistics is a communications consulting firm that studies communications patterns in one-on-one and small group situations. Here’s what the typical listening curve looks like:

Degree of listening/maintaining full attention to the speaker

High

Low

Period of time the other person is talking ....

The basic idea is that we listen just enough up front to get the gist of what the other person is saying and enough on the back end to pick up on the language they are using to make it look like we’re listening – but we’re not really listening.

What are we doing during this period? We’re formulating a response or we’re evaluating what’s been said, or we’re day dreaming, or we’re thinking about the ball game last night, or planning our weekend, but we’re not listening!
Communicate

BYU Manager’s Toolbox

Communication Forums

There are many useful forums for creating two-way communications with your organization. Here’s a sampling of things you might already be doing or that you might try to step up communication with your people:

1. **Staff Meetings** – This is the most basic forum for sharing with the group what is going on in the organization and for discussing group needs.

2. **Meat and Eats** – Opportunities for people to meet with more senior managers in the organization in a small group setting to hear division plans and updates and to give inputs on issues the employees are facing.

3. **Quarterly Meetings** – Opportunity for management to present the progress of the organization and to answer employee questions.

4. **Team Off-Sites** – A longer than normal meeting of a half day to two days in an informal environment for the team to discuss issues of its own effectiveness and to solve the “drain the swamp” issues that there never is time for in the normal course of business.

5. **Speak Ups** – Meetings for employees to speak up on quality of work life issues such as working conditions, resources, benefits issues, facilities, work-life balance issues etc. Usually led by a facilitator with techniques for involving everyone’s inputs.

6. **All hands meetings** – Large gathering of all employees in the organization at the same time in an auditorium setting. Useful for information dissemination and for announcing major plans such as building changes, major wins or issues, annual plans etc.

7. **Project post mortems** – A chance for the people involved in a major project completion to de-brief what went well, what didn’t go well, and discuss key learnings and changes for the next project, etc.

These types of forums can go a long way to improving the culture of communication in the organization. At the least they send a strong message to employees that management cares about the inputs and satisfaction of every employee.

Hold Re-Recruitment Interviews

One of the best communications vehicles is to conduct “re-recruitment interviews” with your top people. This is a one-on-one meeting where you discuss with your key people issues that relate to their motivation and retention on the job. Key questions that might be discussed in a re-recruitment interview include:

- What do you like best about working here and what aspects of the job or organization motivate you to stay?
- What are the barriers or things that frustrate you in your position?

The 1962 Mets were a pitiful baseball team, a patchwork of retread players in the twilight of their careers. Julio Vachan was their starting short stop who, because he spoke no English was constantly running into his center fielder Riche Ashburn on shallow fly balls to center because he couldn’t understand when Ashburn would call him off the ball – in English. Finally Ashburn and he worked out the signal in Spanish – “Yo lo tengo!” – “I’ve got it.” The next game a shallow fly ball is sent out to left center and both Vachan and Ashburn go charging after it full speed. “Yo lo tengo! Yo lo tengo!” Ashburn yells, and BAM – he smashes into the Mets’ left fielder.

Yo Lo Tengo!
• What learning and growth opportunities would you like?
• Do you get all the information you need to do your job?
• How do you feel about the level of challenge and responsibility you have?
• What would you like more of or less of?
• Etc.

It is important that you let the person know that they are a key contributor and that you value their contribution to the team. It would be best to have a frank discussion about their needs and expectations and to establish an agreement with them along these lines:

Will you let me know if you ever consider leaving BYU before things go too far in the process?

Establishing this kind of relationship with your top performers can put you in a position to be very proactive about their retention.

To Do List

√ Establish a communication “rhythm” with your team. Decide what meetings or communication forums work for your group and conduct these religiously.

√ Regularly share business and strategy information with your team – the kind of stuff they want to know. If you don’t have that kind of information available to you, make it your business to get it.

√ Practice listening with your team members. Tell them you’re working on being a better listener and ask them to keep you honest when they find that you’re not listening.

√ Hold “re-recruitment interviews. They cost you nothing to do and they can help build the level of trust and communication you have with your team.

The Bottom Line

Stay in the loop and keep your employees in the loop. It will help you keep your talent.