

# GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE KEY TO LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

Use transparency to build trust and motivate employees to exceed expectations By Danny Goldberg, CPA, CIA, CISA

The foundation of good leadership is communication. This is a belief I have held for many years and continues to be reinforced through my interactions with management of all levels. In fact, the older I get, the more I realize good communication skills are the most important asset in the path to success. As accounting/finance professionals, our professions are not well known to have the strongest communication skills. Strengthening our communication and interpersonal skills will lead to not only more efficient workmanship, but also a better understanding of our industry. Additionally, I have also learned that communication skills are imperative in all facets of our lives.

## Be Willing to Communicate

My eight-year old son Caleb plays select soccer and basketball. He is a very good athlete, but our main goal is to make sure he gets taught at a high level in addition to developing good teamwork and competitive skills. Over the past year, our experience with coaching at that level has been mixed, to say the least. In the past year, we have now switched teams/coaches twice; not due to lack of sport knowledge, cost or competitiveness; but, plain and simply, due to a lack of any



communication skills. His basketball coach would not respond to texts or e-mails and not communicate well with parents, even though we were paying his “salary.” More importantly, he struggled with reaching the kids. He even told me such.

In January, my son and I were watching an indoor soccer game before his scheduled game when his coach came by and said something to Caleb. Nothing negative, nothing derogatory; just a simple statement on preparing before the game. Caleb looked distraught. I did not understand his reaction whatsoever. He finally admitted to me that he was scared of his coach. This was a very unique reaction for Caleb. I coached him for years and I am aggressive and I am a yeller and there was never anything like that. We had been with this coach for a season and “Steven” was a yeller. Steven is not only a yeller, but he is a negative yeller. There is not any positive reinforcement in his coaching. For four months, I never

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heard anything positive like good hustle, nice try, great effort... it was you scored because you finally listened to me, etc.

For a few months, I thought my son was scared, but he never came out and said it. On numerous occasions, I tried to engage Steven; I would ask him what we could do at home to continue to improve, how are things going, is Caleb meeting expectations, etc. He would either not engage at all or take days to respond. In fact, when we chatted in person, he could not keep any eye contact at all. Not at all.

There were many indicators of issues, but I tried to ignore them because I wanted it to work. After the scared conversation, I spoke to Steven and he told me he would address the issues, but underneath the contrition was a recurring theme — I am what I am, so either adjust or leave. Concurrently, we were introduced to a new team and a coach that is in customer service as his full-time job. The differences were striking and we moved on and are very happy with his current position. Bottom line is communication is the foundation of businesses and industries because they involve one common theme — people.

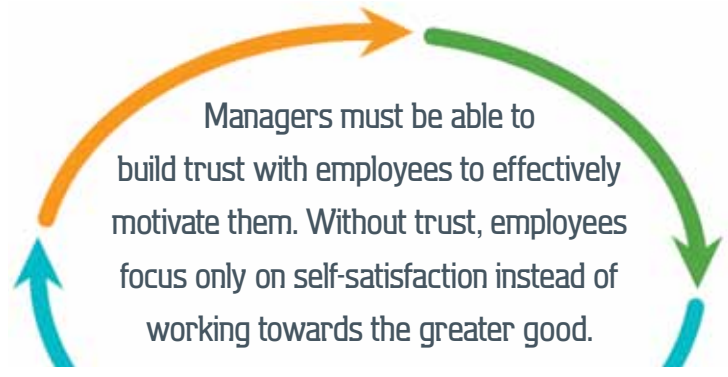
### Be Transparent to Build Trust

Employees should become managers because they can communicate effectively. That is not always the case; people get promoted due to technical ability and, even though that factors into management, the key effective management is continuous, transparent communication. The simplest aspects of communication are not practiced at times, which leads to conflict and employees leaving the organization. Every company should have basic training for new managers on how to effectively manage.

One key aspect of effective people management is transparency. As a reformed internal auditor, this has become one of my favorite business terms. Internal auditors have to be transparent in order to build the foundation for any effective relationship: trust. Managers must be able to build trust with employees to effectively motivate them. Without trust, employees focus only on self-satisfaction instead of working towards the greater good. How is trust build? Transparency is the best way to build that foundation. Managers can be transparent by:

- Keeping employees informed of what is occurring inside the organization
- Addressing issues as they occur
- Giving timely feedback on performance
- Setting and communicating expectations

Many employees' perception of happenings inside the organization is directly correlated to their own job satisfaction. Employees tend to not trust when they are not in the loop. Rumors and hearsay tend to hurt employee morale. Managers cannot always control this, but they can mitigate the noise factor by adding a few simple checkpoints with their team. Here are some simple ideas:



- Schedule and conduct monthly staff meetings that are focused on informing the team of what is going on in the department and in the company
- Forward all relevant and non-confidential communication to the team
- Do not ignore office gossip; Address it head on, with the entire team, rather than individuals.

Confrontation is not an inherently negative term; however, we have made it as such in corporate America. Confrontation is a face-to-face meeting concerning different view points. As a manager, it is important not to avoid confrontation and address issues as they occur. The quicker they are addressed, the less relevant each issue becomes.

Another way managers can promote transparency is timely, continuous feedback. Formal feedback, in most organizations, is given annually. However, annual frequency can really set up employees to fail rather than succeed. Employees cannot correct issues in their work without continuous feedback on how they are doing and progressing. Now the other side of this argument is companies tend to become too meeting-oriented, which is a fair complaint. Managers, depending on the number of staff that report to them, should try to plan at least bi-monthly one-on-one conversations with each team member.

Finally, one of the simplest and most obvious steps managers should take is effectively communicating expectations. I would say, based on unrefined polling I have conducted, less than 25 percent of managers have this type of conversation. This is not the here is what you are supposed to do conversation; this is the here is the pathway to success. Managers should tell staff exactly how to not only meet expectations, but how to exceed expectations. Let's make sure everybody is on the same page as to what is to be done; employees cannot succeed working towards gray; make it black and white.

Good leadership is defined by strong communication; in fact, as I steal the premise for this next statement from the classic Steve Martin movie *My Blue Heaven*, I don't believe in communication; I believe in OVER-communication. Do not leave it up to chance or assumption; make it clear exactly what you want and how you want it. Over-communication and transparency breeds trust and trust makes employees not meet expectations, but constantly strive to exceed expectations. ■