

## Chapter Five

### COMMUNICATION

**A** heart-warming ritual took place during the construction of a new building at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, Massachusetts. The unlikely participants in this ritual were a group of ironworkers and cancer-stricken children going in for their chemotherapy treatments. Each day the children who went to the current cancer center would write their names on pieces of paper and then tape the papers up on the windows of a walkway in full view of the construction site. The ironworkers saw the children's names and purposefully and carefully spray painted the names on the steel girders before hoisting them into place. The children and their parents watched with joy as their names became a permanent part of this important building.

Such a simple act, but the awareness it brought to the ironworkers each day was a reminder that what they were doing was more than just building a building. They were bringing hope for a brighter future to so many parents and children alike.

We all want to know that our work makes a difference. Like the ironworkers in this story, a connection to something bigger than our tasks gives us a sense of purpose beyond the day-to-day mechanics of the job. When that connection or sense of purpose is weak or nonexistent, it's easy to feel like a cog in a machine. If

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you've ever learned of an important company announcement about the company you work for by reading it in the newspaper, you know the feeling of being a cog. We all like to be in the loop. Every day we read in the paper about another round of layoffs coming for one company or another. We can only imagine the thousands of employees who learned of their fate in such an impersonal way.

Communicating to your employees about a service initiative plays a vital role in ensuring its success. If done poorly, the initiative is doomed from the start. Too many organizations, for instance, think that communication simply means an article in the company newsletter: "Well, we announced it in the newsletter, so everyone should know." Leaders are often under the mistaken belief that all employees scour the newsletter for information regarding any new corporate initiative. Effective communication is much more than a newsletter article. *Everything you do* is a potential communication tool—and the more personalized, the better.

The Leadership Action of Communication appears about midway in this book. The fact is, however, that communication is an ongoing part of the service improvement process. It never ends. The previous chapter discussed the development of the Service Philosophy and Service Standards. These now must be communicated to the organization. Communication about the service improvement process, however, should occur earlier, so that employees know what's coming. You can eliminate a lot of frustration with advance communication followed by consistent, ongoing follow-up.

This chapter outlines a communication and awareness plan that helps to ensure that the right message is communicated to the right audience at the right time. Key questions must be answered: How will employees be introduced to the initiative? How will the organization keep everyone informed of what is happening? How will successes be communicated?

### **Communication Tools**

The more communication tools you use, the more likely that people will get the message. First Financial Bankshares, a holding

company made up of ten banks, has truly mastered the art of service communication. Messages to employees about the service initiative are everywhere you turn. In addition to bulletin boards, computer screensavers, newsletters, rallies, and recognition events, they have what they call a WOW news release, a short e-mail blast to all employees that shares a story of service excellence in action. Figure 5.1 provides an example of a WOW news release. They've also instituted regular "20-Minute Meeting"

Wow!

First Financial Bankshares  
Customer Service Recognition



**Employees of FFB, Abilene Send Get Well Wishes to Customer**

While making a deposit at First Financial Bank, Abilene's Wal-Mart South Branch, a customer mentioned her upcoming surgery to a Branch employee. Employees of the Branch signed a get-well card for their customer and mailed it to her while she was recuperating.

In a letter to Ron Butler, the customer wrote, "I was touched by their personal touch, which means so much in this fast paced world. Thanks again for quality employees at the best bank in Abilene!"

We recognize the employees of Wal-Mart South for providing great customer service with the personal touch!

**Congratulations to the employees of Wal-Mart South for their WOW!**

**March 4, 2008**

**Let's make WOW Customer Service an every day event.**

**Do you know someone who provides WOW customer service? Submit their story to your bank president.**

**"We build loyal, life-long relationships by providing first class service with personal attention."**

**Figure 5.1 WOW News Release Example**

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topics, which reinforce some aspect of service excellence. Managers receive a facilitator guide for discussing the topic with employees along with interactive participant materials designed to involve employees in the discussion (Figure 5.2).

The point is to be creative in using *every means available* to communicate the Service Philosophy and Service Standards. As you go through the information in this chapter, consider all of the media available in your organization for communicating the message of service excellence.

**FIRST FINANCIAL BANKSHARES**



# 20 Minute Meetings

*Growing the Business IS*

## Everybody's Business

**Everything Speaks**

Participant's Worksheet

Who is my favorite person to see in public or meet with or have lunch with? Why?

  
  

Would anybody list me as their "favorite person" to see in public? Why or why not?

  
  

Do I treat others fairly and kindly outside of work?

  
  

How do I behave when I think nobody I know is watching me?

  
  

3 behaviors I will practice every day in 2010:

  
  

**Everything Speaks – I am the bank!**

**Figure 5.2 Everything Speaks Participant's Worksheet**

## Stages of Understanding

Nearly everyone experiences three stages of understanding when presented with any new idea, concept, or principle. The three stages are:

1. Awareness—People gain a general understanding that something new is happening.
2. Awkwardness—People try to figure out and apply the new principles/ideas to their own situations. Confusion and frustration are common.
3. Assimilation—The new principles/ideas are incorporated into day-to-day life.

Look at the use of the Internet as an example of the stages of understanding. For those of us old enough that we didn't grow up with the Internet, we started with a very basic understanding of this technology. We had an *awareness* of its existence but didn't really understand what it was all about. All we knew was that it was supposedly something important and useful. Most people had a "we'll see what happens" attitude about the Internet. After a while, we realized that it wasn't going away. More and more people were talking about the Internet and were allegedly getting some benefit from it. So we decided to test the waters a little. Our first few forays onto the Net were probably awkward and uncomfortable. There was likely plenty of frustration and more questions than answers. If we persisted through the *awkward* stage (although some did not), we began to assimilate the Net into our lives. We began using the Internet for such tasks as ordering books, checking the weather, staying on top of the news, communicating with colleagues and friends, checking flight times, and hundreds of other tasks. And with today's social media tools, we can literally share our minute-by-minute activities with anyone who cares to read about them! Back in the *awareness* or *awkwardness* stages no one could have convinced us that we'd be using the Internet as an integral part of our daily lives. But most of

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us are doing exactly that. In fact, most of us cannot remember how we got along without it.

When launching and sustaining a service initiative, it's important to recognize where people are in the stages of understanding. People have needs that must be fulfilled before they can go on to the next stage. But this principle is violated all the time. We try to rush an initiative without thinking through how employees can best deal with the information. Managers usually rationalize the resulting frustration or apathy by stating, "Our employees just don't get the big picture." It's management's job to communicate the big picture so employees *do* get it. Understanding can stop at the *awareness* or *awkwardness* stages if communication is not executed effectively.

### **Critical Point**

Different levels of the organization go through the stages at different times. The executive team, for example, is usually the group first exposed to a proposed service initiative. They first become aware that something new may be happening. They receive this information from the CEO or whoever is championing the effort. The executives then go through the *awkwardness* stage, trying to deal with the new information and figuring out how to make it workable (or how to make it just go away). Finally, if the executives make it through the first two stages, they begin to assimilate the information and come up with strategies for application. Executives run into serious problems when they forget that other levels of the company are going through, or will go through, the same stages of understanding.

Imagine an executive who, for example, is in the *assimilation* stage. He has worked through the other stages and is now excited and motivated to come up with ideas and solutions. Imagine that he's discussing the service initiative with a mid-level manager who is in the *awkwardness* stage. The mid-level manager is uncomfortable about the whole thing at this point. After all, he's

in the *awkwardness* stage. If the executive doesn't understand the different stages and needs, he's likely to be frustrated by the manager's lack of enthusiasm, acceptance, and buy-in. The manager is likely to be frustrated by this executive who seems to be piling one more initiative on the manager's plate. And don't forget about the frontline employee! At this point she doesn't know anything about the initiative but is being asked to join improvement teams, participate in brainstorming sessions, and "be on the bus." She's wondering where this bus came from. She's barely into the *awareness* stage. Everyone ends up frustrated, skeptical of change, and resistant to new initiatives. It's no wonder that so many initiatives fail.

Let's explore each stage of understanding, the mindset that employees have at each stage, and effective communication approaches.

## Awareness

There was a time not too long ago when someone had the vision that not all books had to be sold through book stores, or that all news information had to be in print and sold at newsstands. The CEO of Sony pictured a phone fitting into the palm of his hand even though the only car phone in existence at the time was bulky and had to be plugged into the vehicle cigarette lighter outlet. Today, of course, books can be purchased with the click of the mouse. Real-time, up-to-the-minute news is at our fingertips on phones that not only fit in our palms, but also let us take and send pictures, do our banking, play games, and so much more than just talk to our friends. The awareness that these things could be done was just a vision and a vision is only a dream until put into action. At the *awareness* stage, things are an idea, not a reality.

During the awareness stage, the service initiative is just a vision. Employees are simply becoming aware that a service initiative is on the radar screen. There will typically be widespread skepticism. Most employees will think, "Here we go again." At this stage,

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employees need *information*. They need to understand *why* the organization is focusing on customer service at this particular time and *why* such a focus is important to the organization's future. Effective communication at this point doesn't focus on hows; it focuses on the *whys*.

A full rollout of a detailed plan for the initiative is inappropriate at this point. A full plan hasn't been developed yet. You can only talk about the plan in basic terms at this stage. But it's important to let employees know about the service initiative early in the process. Too many organizations wait until they have a complete plan before they communicate anything. We feel that this approach is a mistake. If you make employees aware of the coming change, and maintain ongoing communication, they won't be surprised when tools, training, and processes are introduced. You'll have already worked through some of the skepticism and doubt.

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"Several years ago, our city was planning on instituting mandatory recycling of cans, glass, plastic, and newspapers. For months we were bombarded with information about recycling and why it was important. At first it sounded like one big hassle. But they kept providing us with information. We all eventually got recycling bins and were eased into the process before it became mandatory. For once, they really thought things through. Now I feel guilty when I'm somewhere that doesn't have recycling and I have to throw a soda can in the regular trash."

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As the Service Improvement Team commissions the development of the Service Philosophy and Service Standards, we recommend that the team begin crafting and executing the awareness strategy. Remember what people need during the awareness stage—information. They need to know that a customer service initiative is being launched and the reasons for the initiative. Keep in mind that you can't expect enthusiasm or company-wide buy-in at this point. Just start getting the word out.

A hospital, for example, scheduled large group management meetings in which customer service and the upcoming initiative were discussed. This approach gave the managers an opportunity to gain an understanding of the initiative's basic framework, ask questions, and express concerns. The hospital's CEO actively participated in these meetings. Managers were encouraged to talk about the basics of the service initiative with their respective teams. Reading material was suggested to the managers. (At the risk of seeming self-serving, you may want to provide managers with a copy of *this* book to accelerate their understanding of the process.) A couple of weeks later, all frontline employees attended similar meetings that introduced the service initiative. Newsletter articles, hospital-wide e-mails, bulletin boards, and other communication tools supported these meetings. Many organizations have created logos that represent their service improvement efforts, putting them on all initiative-related communications.

Figure 5.3 highlights the components of effective communication during the awareness stage.

You should feel comfortable saying "I don't know" at this stage of the game. You don't have all the answers. Employees are going to help come up with the answers. During the awareness stage, you just want everyone to know that change is coming—stay tuned.

What employees need: *Information*

Communication Approach:

- Why the organization is focusing on customer service.
- The basic approach the organization plans to take with the service initiative.
- Why employee involvement is important to the success of the initiative.
- What type of communication employees can expect to see.
- Commitment from top leadership.

**Figure 5.3** Communication During the Awareness Stage

## **Awkwardness**

The second stage, awkwardness, occurs about the time service training (discussed in the next chapter) starts to roll out. During this stage, employees begin to make use of the service improvement tools such as the Everything Speaks Checklist, Service Mapping, Measurement Charts, and so on. Managers conduct brainstorming sessions regarding departmental service improvement. During this time, the Service Improvement Team is ensuring that the training is executed effectively. They are also developing recognition, measurement, and accountability processes. Expect to see and hear plenty of confusion at this stage. Employees will argue about the applicability of the tools and the service effort in general. There may be some finger pointing that goes on.

Since this stage can be the most difficult to work through in keeping everyone focused on the vision, it takes continued visible reinforcement from the top. CEO Linda Watson of LYNX, a bus transit system, wanted to ensure communication of her commitment to the service initiative. A video was created of her stating all the reasons why the company was moving in this direction. While she couldn't be physically present at all the training sessions, this video was shown so that the entire employee population of bus operators and administrative staff would see and hear her personal commitment. She reinforced this during the awkwardness stage by having ASK LINDA boxes placed at all locations so any employee could ask her a question about the service initiative and she would personally respond. The most frequent questions were put in the company newsletter along with her response. Also during this awkwardness stage, acrylic-sleeved frames were placed in all elevators and other high-traffic employee areas. Each month a new graphic communicating the Service Philosophy or an aspect of the Service Standards was created and inserted into the frame.

Please remember that the awkwardness stage is the final stage for many service improvement efforts. Due to the visible confusion and frustration, leadership often thinks the initiative isn't working and brings it to a halt. It's important to recognize the role

that awkwardness plays in the process. Employees *need* to wrestle with the concepts. They need to adapt the tools to their world. They need to express their doubts, questions, and confusion. During the awkwardness stage you can expect to see some employees embrace the service improvement effort wholeheartedly. You can expect to see others reject it completely. Most employees approach the effort with some skepticism but are willing to give it a try. The primary mindset at this stage is usually, “How long will it last?”

During the awkwardness stage, employees need *reassurance*. Remember learning to ride your first two-wheeled bike? It’s likely that your mom or dad ran along beside you, holding you up as you wobbled down the sidewalk. As you became more confident, they let go. But chances are they still ran along beside you, huffing and puffing, shouting encouragement, reassuring you, and being there in case you fell. Finally, they let you ride off once you felt confident.

Your employees need reassurance that they’ll be supported to succeed in the service improvement effort. They need to know that you aren’t saying, “Just get on the bike and ride, or else!” Figure 5.4 highlights the components of effective communication during the awkwardness stage.

Employees need to know that the organization is committed to the effort in the long term. If they see communication beginning to drop off, or worse yet stop, credibility is lost very quickly. Keep the service improvement message highly visible as employees work their way through the awkwardness stage.

What employees need: *Reassurance*

Communication Approach:

- Stories and examples of service excellence in action.
- Coaching on using the service improvement tools.
- Recognition of employees who are providing great service.
- Ongoing commitment to getting input from employees about the service improvement initiative.

**Figure 5.4** Communication During the Awkwardness Stage

## Assimilation

The *assimilation* stage is characterized by a feeling that there is a consistent understanding of the service initiative and that service excellence behaviors are becoming “inculturated.” During this stage the service improvement tools have become part of the normal operation, everyone has attended the appropriate training, and accountability processes have been implemented. There may be some left-over skepticism from the earlier stages, but, overall, most everyone is on board.

You can expect to reach this point 12 to 18 months into the effort (as long as you stick it out through the awkwardness stage and have truly implemented the processes described in this book). The mindset of employees at this stage is likely to be, “so what else is new?” There’s a real danger of losing momentum or allowing service improvement communication to go stale. Many may not even be aware of the impact of the service improvement effort; they’ve simply assimilated it into their behaviors. Many may not realize how unusual it is for an organization to take on a significant cultural change and see it through.

Several years ago we worked with a resort organization on a large service improvement effort. They were very committed and followed through on most, if not all, of the improvement processes. During a later conversation with a member of the management team, he expressed disappointment with the initiative. He felt not much had changed. “How are your business results lately?” we asked. He said they were better than ever. “How about customer satisfaction?” Again, better than ever. Employee turnover was down, morale was strong, and they were expanding into new markets. Why was this manager disappointed? Because the initiative had been assimilated into the daily operation. It didn’t *feel* like anything new was happening because service excellence was now “business as usual.”

Upon reaching the assimilation stage, it’s important to keep service communication fresh, creative, and ongoing. Don’t let up! During the assimilation stage employees need communication

regarding *what's new*. About the time you reach the assimilation stage is when the Service Improvement Team typically transitions to new members. Communicate the changing of the guard. Let everyone know what has been accomplished since the beginning of the initiative. The new members of the Service Improvement Team should take a fresh look at the communications process. Remember those posters that were put up during the launch? Are they looking worn and faded? Is the company newsletter still referring to the "new service initiative"? Employees need to see that service is and will remain a top priority. Fresh, creative communication can assist with this. In a very public way the CEO should recognize what has been accomplished but also recommit him or herself to keeping service excellence a top priority.

Kim Poulton, executive sponsor of the Service Improvement Team for Florida's Turnpike Enterprise, was emphatic that every employee would represent the organization's Service Standards consistently every day. Not an easy task, considering there are 4,600 employees, employed by more than 12 different corporate entities, deployed on a 608-mile road network.

Each quarter, Florida's Turnpike Enterprise's 320 managers receive a booklet of communication strategies, all focused on one Service Standard for the quarter. The booklet for the quarter contains three communications strategies (one per month) that the manager is expected to deliver. It's up to the manager how to deliver messages, based on the needs of the specific team. The booklet includes an overview of the plan, a reminder of the Service Standards, a one-page article for each topic, and suggestions for delivering the message to a group. The managers also receive a "toolbox" containing supplemental materials such as display posters, quotations, and Internet references. A feedback card is included for managers to return to the Service Improvement Team each month with a description of how they had delivered their message and how many employees they had reached.

Walt Disney World has always focused on continuous improvement of their guest services. At one time they began an initiative they called "Performance Excellence." An important part of the

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effort was a yearly best practices fair. Departments from all over the company were invited to create booths highlighting things that they were doing to create service excellence. Internal and external service were both highlighted. Cast members explored the fair to see what was happening around the company. Everyone, especially the executive team, was blown away by the things that were happening. The results were fantastic:

- Best practices were shared around the entire organization.
- Guests were continually wowed by improved service approaches.
- Cast members saw that service was an ongoing priority.
- Management was exposed to the creativity of the cast for elevating the guest experience.

These best practice fairs were used as a tool to creatively communicate “what’s new.”

Figure 5.5 highlights the components of effective communication during the assimilation stage.

Your main objective during the assimilation stage should be to keep the momentum of the customer service effort going. Be creative and relentless. Keep in mind that radically new service ideas will travel through the awareness and awkwardness stages again before being assimilated into day-to-day behaviors. It’s a never-ending process.

What employees need: *What’s new about the service effort*

Communication Approach:

- Direction and priorities of the Service Improvement Team.
- Success stories—service heroes.
- Best practices.
- Satisfaction measurement results.
- Refreshed and renewed collateral materials.
- Ongoing involvement opportunities.

**Figure 5.5 Communication During the Assimilation Stage**

## Concluding Thoughts

Ongoing communication of the service improvement effort is critical to its overall success. Communication, however, must be orchestrated so that the right message goes to the right audience at the right time. It's important to recognize that each stage of understanding (awareness, awkwardness, and assimilation) has unique needs and must be handled appropriately. Many service improvement initiatives fail due to the fact that organizations don't recognize the stages of understanding or realize that different parts of the organization may be in different stages. By planning a communication strategy appropriately, with employee needs in mind, you can keep momentum up and ensure that service improvement becomes a way of life in the organization.

## Service Improvement Team Action Steps

- Assign this Leadership Action to a Service Improvement Team member who is familiar with your organization's formal communications processes.
- Develop a plan of awareness activities for the next 6 to 9 months.
- Order the necessary materials to carry out the awareness plan.
- Prepare agenda items for management meetings to ensure there is ongoing discussion regarding the process.
- Communicate and encourage use of all service improvement tools.
- Collect "wow" ideas and report feedback to other areas.
- Collaborate with other Leadership Action chairpersons in communicating their progress and successes.
- Recognize that new ideas, processes, and concepts will travel through the stages of understanding—awareness, awkwardness, and assimilation.

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- Be creative in your use of all forms of communications media.
- Recognize that skepticism and apathy are normal responses to initial communications.

### **Pitfalls to Avoid**

- Don't rely on the company newsletter as the only communication medium.
- Don't assume or expect that everyone goes through the stages of understanding at the same time.
- Don't wait until the service improvement initiative is fully planned before beginning the communication process. Prepare people for what is coming.
- Don't just communicate the facts. Tell stories!
- Don't let communication go stale as time goes on.