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**The Biggest
Roadblock to
Organizational
Success:
Poor Internal
Communication**

ISSUE 5 • SEPTEMBER 2022



The Biggest Roadblock to Organizational Success: Poor Internal Communication

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The world has changed in significant and dramatic ways since The Latimer Group was founded twenty years ago. In the corporate world, one of the most disruptive changes has been the increase in noise that surrounds us every day: the constant and ready access to emails, texts, news feeds, and any information we could possibly want, always just one click away. There's an increasing and corresponding presumption that everyone is always available, whether for a meeting or to respond to an email, and an increasing expectation that every deadline is *now*. Under all these pressures, and with the possibilities for distraction nearly endless, we all struggle to manage and protect our time. More importantly, when everyone around us is struggling with the same issues, it is harder and harder to get people to focus on what we are saying, and simply *be heard*.

But this isn't just a problem for us individually. In our research, we have seen clearly that poor *internal communication* is the biggest obstacle organizations face—and more consistently than the hurdles posed by the competition, the market, or the economy. The way that people inside the organization communicate with each other plays an outsized role in whether a business makes progress or stays stagnant.

Think about it this way: how much of your time at work is spent trying to communicate with the people inside your company? In our workshops, many participants calculate that they spend more than 80% of their workday communicating in one form or another (meetings, calls, presentations, or email exchanges), and most of that is internal—more than 32 hours of a typical 40-hour week.

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Here's the follow-up question we always ask: “How much of your time gets wasted because of bad communication behaviors from the people around you?” The answer, typically, is more than 40%. That means that nearly two days, out of a five-day workweek, is lost to ineffective internal communication.

It's not just anecdotal. A survey conducted by The Economist's Intelligence Unit¹ found that “communication barriers are leading to a delay or failure to complete projects (44%), low morale (31%), missed performance goals (25%) and even lost sales (18%)—some worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.” Other surveys have indicated that large companies see an average loss of \$64.2 million per year because of inadequate internal communication, and smaller organizations see an average loss of \$420,000

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¹ https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/EIU_Lucidchart-Communication%20barriers%20in%20the%20modern%20workplace.pdf



annually.² (Conversely, another study found that “companies that communicate effectively had a 47% higher return to shareholders over a five-year period.”³)

We spend much of our working life communicating, and doing it ineffectively wastes time, erodes morale, and hampers innovation. For real change to happen, therefore, leadership must commit to, prioritize, invest in, and model good communication behaviors. With certain proven strategies, ones we’ve consistently seen bring positive changes to organizations’ communication, leadership can boost performance and produce better outcomes. But before we can effectively try to solve the problem, first we need to understand its scope.

Underestimating the power of internal communications

Corporate leadership isn’t blind to the importance of communication—it’s just that they tend to emphasize external communication without creating similar standards and training for internal communication. It’s understandable. External communications build a company’s brand and drive its sales. But many of the most meaningful communications that occur, especially in large, complex organizations, are internal. These communications set the culture, build consensus around ideas, and direct resources towards building new products, instituting new procedures, and driving overall outcomes.

In our workshops, we often ask participants to choose a presentation to give as part of the coaching and feedback process. We ask them to think about a topic and audience that will be influential in achieving the kind of career success they aspire to. We encourage them to choose a topic and scenario that

is particularly challenging for them. And, curiously, about 80% of our participants choose an internal meeting or pitch of some kind, rather than an external scenario with a customer or prospective client. Our participants are telling us, clearly, that the scenarios they need the most help with are internal. Strong internal communications also boost productivity and fortify an organization’s morale. Studies have shown that “when employees both identify with the organization and understand its messages, employees more readily exemplify the organization’s core values. Organizations with good reputations tend to view communication—particularly internal communication—as a strategic vehicle to increase their competitive advantage and solve problems.⁴” Increasing the positive experience of employees also increases the positive perceptions of the company *externally*.

More generally, it’s difficult to truly have effective external communication when internal communication is ineffective. The common practices behind strong internal communications—clear communication of a vision, understanding of an audience’s needs, building consensus around objectives—also underpin external communication.

In other words, research—ours and others’—tells us that it is strong internal communication behaviors that ultimately create significant external impact.



Two aspects of the modern workplace are particularly susceptible to a lack of investment in good internal communication practices: messaging overload, (email or text), and meeting culture. They also tend to be areas where people overly rely on the status quo—

2 <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/communication/pages/the-cost-of-poor-communications.aspx>

3 <https://hbr.org/2009/11/new-study-how-communication-dr>

4 https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Leah-Omilion-Hodges/publication/260313996_Everyday_talk_and_convincing_conversations_Utilizing_strategic_internal_communication/links/5ac14acc45851584fa75a0b6/Everyday-talk-and-convincing-conversations-Utilizing-strategic-internal-communication.pdf

following practices, even if inefficient, because they are the way things have always been done.

All of us have experienced what happens when guidelines about messaging choices are fuzzy or nonexistent: a text late at night that really should have been an email, an email relaying sensitive news that really should have been a phone call, an email inbox overflowing with messages that are too long, unclear, or extraneous. With the increasing prevalence⁵ of remote or hybrid work, this kind of messaging overload has become ubiquitous.

Too often, leadership makes the mistake of seeing this kind of messaging overload as a natural consequence of the proliferation of communication avenues, both organic and inevitable. They don't make the effort to

understand “media richness⁶”—how each medium can be more or less effective in conveying specific types of information—and set internal standards for how and when to use various types of communication. Nor do they lay out expectations for email communication—using clear subject lines, prioritizing concision, eliminating unnecessary responses or initial messages, considering who really needs to be cc'd on a message.

This landscape is made even more complicated as workplaces shift to remote or hybrid work, especially when leaders haven't shifted their behaviors and expectations⁷ to meet these new needs.

But by far the costliest problem for organizations is also the most common: poor meeting culture.

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“Our participants are telling us, clearly, that the scenarios they need the most help with are internal.”

5 <https://thelatimergroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Leading-the-Evolution-FATHOM-Issue-3.pdf>

6 <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27212>

7 <https://thelatimergroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Creating-a-Culture-FATHOM-Issue-4.pdf>



“The effects of a bad meeting can linger for hours in the form of attendee grouching and complaining – a phenomenon dubbed ‘meeting recovery syndrome.’”

Meeting malaise

The problem of too many meetings is not a new one⁸. But it is a persistent one that requires a deliberate shift in mindset on the part of company leadership.

At least part of the problem is that leaders don't see the problem. According to Steven G. Rogelberg, a professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, "Research suggests that of the 23 hours that executives spend in meetings each week, on average, eight are unproductive. Some 90% of people report daydreaming in meetings, and 73% admit that they use meeting time to do other work. And yet research by myself and others shows that leaders consistently rate their own meetings very favorably—and much more positively than attendees do."⁹

Worse, as Rogelberg goes on, those unproductive meetings have an outsized impact:

Apart from the actual time wasted—estimated to be more than \$30 billion a year in the United States alone—there are opportunity costs of employees' not working on more important, inspiring, or revenue-generating tasks. Reduced engagement has been shown to diminish everything from performance and innovation to service delivery, helping others, and teamwork. One recent study found that the effects of a bad meeting can linger for hours in the form of attendee grouching and complaining—a phenomenon dubbed "meeting recovery syndrome."¹⁰

This meeting overload comes out of good intentions: a way to boost efficiency by facilitating real-time communication (in person or virtual),

seeing it as the most direct way to give immediate access to information. But back-to-back-to-back meetings disallow time to decompress, analyze the information presented at the last meeting, or get other tasks done.

The end result is a culture of multi-tasking and fatigue, leading to poor listening and a lack of connection between colleagues and clients. With no time to respond to timely emails or requests, meeting attendees feel compelled to try to squeeze in other tasks while others are talking. Or they simply lose focus after multiple hours of meetings and presentations. Either way, it means that many people in a meeting don't retain as much information, requiring more time in the next meeting to recap the previous one. And so the cycle continues.

Why is poor communication so widespread and, often, deeply entrenched in corporate cultures? The short answer is that poor communication happens when leadership hasn't committed to providing training, setting standards, and offering feedback. As Helio Fred Garcia, a professor at NYU's Stern School of Business and an expert on leadership communication, has observed¹¹, "The most common cause of poor leader communication is that leaders don't take communication nearly as seriously as they take other business disciplines."

Leaders often discount their own need to maintain their skills at communication, seeing it as a skill so foundational that they would never have attained their position without already achieving the highest levels

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8 https://thelatimergroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FATHOM_V1_I1_Digital.pdf

9 Rogelberg, Steven G. Harvard Business Review. Jan/Feb2019, Vol. 97 Issue 1, p140-143. 40p. 2 Color Photographs, 2 Illustrations. <https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-your-meetings-stink-and-what-to-do-about-it>

10 Ibid

11 <https://blog.shrm.org/workplace/leader-communication-could-be-better>



of success at communication. What this overlooks is that communication is a skill set that requires intentional choices and practice in order to maintain.

The good news is that there are clear, effective steps that leadership can take to improve their own and their team's communication. Broadly, strong communication depends on leadership to model good communication practices, to demonstrate how valued good communication is within the organization, and to encourage growth and development among staff.

More specifically, we've seen four core strategies that create stronger organizational communication from the top down:

- Take an **intentional approach** to communication culture
- Make **active listening** a foundational practice
- Build a **communication culture** that emphasizes respect
- Invest in and embody **best practices**

The sum effect of these strategies is to treat communication as another product of the organization, one that requires a repeatable process of training, with a focus on outcomes, to be both successful and sustainable.

Intentional approaches

Several years ago, we met a client who made a clear and strategic decision to elevate her organization's communication efforts. In her field there had always been an imperative to be best-in-class for sourcing and procurement; communication needs had often been considered a "soft skill," considered more an innate talent than a trainable set of proficiencies. This executive overhauled the company culture, adding annual training to the budget and instituting a

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mandate for routine coaching and instruction. She set out a well-defined set of standards for best practices and areas of improvement and offered direct and constructive feedback when her reports fell short.

These efforts meant that her organization developed an *intentional* communication culture, one that didn't rely on natural ability or fuzzy metrics.

What are the hallmarks of *intentional* communication culture?

- **Constant reviewing, considered change:** Taking an intentional approach to communication means that you need to stay alert to areas of weakness or the need for adjustment as circumstances change. But it is also important not to change impetuously. Thoughtful action will mean that changes to communication standards have both a clear rationale and a desired outcome.
- **Structuring feedback to encourage improvement:** Offering feedback—both positive and negative—is critical to maintaining strong communication.



But feedback needs to happen in a structured way that provides straightforward avenues to either replicating excellence or reducing flaws. Telling someone that they've failed can only be productive if they have an opportunity to rectify the problem.

- **Building a process that is repeatable¹², outcome focused, and measurable:** Any company wants its clientele to know they can expect a work product that looks, performs, and costs essentially the same, every time; communication, internal and external, should be treated in the same way. Putting in place a mandate for communication, providing the necessary training, and setting

metrics that allow for objective evaluation makes it more likely that everyone will build a sound portfolio of communication skills.

Leaders who take a collaborative approach to their teams particularly need to establish best practices in order to effectively run meetings, set priorities, and accomplish goals. And it's not just leaders who benefit: survey data¹³ has shown that "78% of respondents think having clearer goals for every scheduled meeting would have a significant impact on improving workplace communication, including 39% who say the improvement would be very significant."

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12 <https://thelatimergroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Latimer-Fathom-vol2-num1-FINAL.pdf>

13 https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/EIU_Lucidchart-Communication%20barriers%20in%20the%20modern%20workplace.pdf



The idea of standardizing communication can feel counterintuitive, and it may seem like identifying and mandating certain communication practices could be limiting or stifle your team's creativity. But the opposite often proves to be the case. Setting standards for communication allows leaders to establish a base of excellence, atop which their team's work can flourish.

Lead with listening

While much of communication training focuses on what we say, experience has shown that it is just as important, if not more, to *listen*. Many of us don't think of listening as a skill, but the process of

listening well takes practice. Listening isn't just about hearing someone's words—it's about absorbing critical information, forging a connection, and understanding the impact on your own goals. It's about "knowing your audience"—so that when you talk, they want to listen.

Valuing listening may require a significant perspective shift. Modern information architecture enables and encourages constant multi-tasking, with instant messages, emails, news alerts, texts, and social media all immediately and enticingly at our fingertips. (All this aided and abetted by the meeting culture we noted above, which largely eliminates blocks of time

to do work outside of meetings.)

But tolerating (or even encouraging) an environment of multi-tasking also builds an environment in which knowledge sharing, particularly in its richest, most immediate form of person-to-person, no longer appears valued. Imparting insights, building consensus, or innovating through collaboration require focus, engagement, and creative cooperation—all of which also require active listening.

Cultivating respect

In our workshops, we hear one complaint with some frequency: that during presentations leaders in the company begin interrupting with questions or criticisms almost immediately. For employees, there is nothing more disheartening than knowing that, however strong your presentation, you won't be able to get past the title slide before fielding an impatient interrogation from your boss.

At the same time, we often hear from leaders that employees' presentations take too long to get to the main point, that it's unclear from the beginning what information is most important, and that, especially during overscheduled workdays, it can be frustrating to have to spend 10 minutes waiting to understand what the main takeaways should be.

These related complaints have a common solution: a culture that prioritizes respect for each other's contributions.

For leaders, one approach that we've seen work well is to set a quiet period during presentations. For a predetermined amount of time, the presenter has sole control of the floor: no queries or comments. Knowing that they have the space to set out their main points can cultivate more confidence and even encourage risk-taking, since employees know they will have time

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to make their case before being overwhelmed by a barrage of questions.

At the same time, leaders should set expectations around how this attention should be rewarded. Every employee should be trained in how to create strong executive summaries, make concise points, and to make sure that their audience understands what's important for them to remember. With this skill set, employees should be able to engage their audience immediately, and increase their ability to make a persuasive argument.

Be the model student

The most important lesson that we've learned over the years is that the framework for strong communication is most effective when it is implemented not only by individual communicators, but by the entire organization. And that means that leaders need to not only embrace the principles of strong communication but embody them.

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That starts with training. We've almost never run a workshop without someone asking, "Is my boss learning all this, too?" When the answer to that question is "Yes," the effect is palpable. Workshop participants invariably take coaching and training more seriously when they know that leadership buy-in is total.

A willingness to learn and grow at any level—rather than to believe that talents are innate—is known as a "growth mindset." Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University and the author of *Mindset*, has studied the phenomenon of growth mindsets over several decades. She's found that those who embrace a growth mindset "tend to achieve¹⁴ more than those with a more fixed mindset...because they worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning. When entire companies embrace a growth mindset, their employees report feeling far more empowered and committed; they also receive far greater

organizational support for collaboration and innovation."

One of the more successful examples we've seen of implementing this mindset was with a client in the aerospace industry. When he took his position, this executive made it clear that excellent communication standards began with him, and that he expected his senior leadership to do the same with each of their teams. There were some growing pains, but through a consistent system of measurable expectations and feedback, his group became known throughout the organization as one that cultivated high standards and supported its employees' development. Throughout the global enterprise, this group had the lowest turnover.

Creating a strong organization—one with motivated team members and a dynamic vision and culture—requires strong communication. Achieving it requires leaders who value communication, invest in it, and model its best practices consistently and capably.

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¹⁴ <https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>