

“Poor Communication” Is Often a Symptom of a Different Problem

by

• [Art Markman](#)

February 22, 2017



Do employees complain that your company suffers from a lack of communication? That the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing? Maybe the one doing the complaining is you. Or perhaps, as many companies do, you conducted an employee engagement survey and “lack of communication” emerged as a top gripe.

I'd like to suggest that this problem may not be what it seems. To understand why, we need to understand that feelings emerge from the activity of the motivational system, the brain regions that engage your goals and drive you to act. And much of the circuitry of the motivational system involves centers deep in the brain that are not well-connected to the areas of the cortex responsible for our ability to be introspective about our actions. Consequently, the source of our feelings is not always clear to us.

That means that when you ask someone questions about how they feel about their workplace, people can answer that pretty readily; most people have a sense of whether they feel good or bad about their work and the company. When you ask for more specific information about what is making them feel good or bad, though, people often grope around for a rationale that *could* explain their feelings. Whether it *does* explain them is hard to judge.

When a company has a specific difficulty that it is addressing, people in the organization may point to that specific difficulty as the source of their negative feelings. When there are no readymade concepts floating around, though, people seek out candidates. And that is where “communication” comes in.

When something has gone wrong at work, people may feel that they did not have the information they needed to make a decision. It might be information about the health of the company, the status of projects in other business units, or the quality of their work. Because people sense that they were missing needed information, they blame lack of communication for the problem.

When taken literally, as a communication problem, managers look for new modes of communication to ensure information is provided. They create new emails, newsletters, meetings, or bulletin boards. The assumption is that greater access to information is the solution.

Before you leap into action — and in the process create a lot more work for yourself — let me suggest that you think of the complaints about communication problems as the canary in the coal mine. It’s a signal that something is wrong, but it itself is probably not the problem.

Start by engaging with people more specifically, getting them to think about specific things that have gone wrong. Instead of assuming that the cause of the problem is a lack of communication, analyze the situation to figure out why people would feel that they could not act effectively.

For example, recently I was working with a group that had complained of communication problems. It was a fast-growing organization, and a number of new employees had been taken on, but their job descriptions were vague. When the company was small, it had been easy to onboard new employees with vague job descriptions, because they would be able to observe what was happening across the company. Now that the organization was bigger, that was no longer the case, and the new employees felt that they could not get their work done.

But the problem was not, as the organization first thought, that people weren’t communicating. The problem was that there was no clear structure defining what employees could and could not do. The real culprit here was that the HR process

needed to be updated to be clearer about job responsibilities, not that the organization as a whole needed to spend more time and effort communicating.

While poor communication is often, in my experience, the scapegoat people point to most readily, it's not the only one. That's why it's important to understand the limitations of people's ability to report what is bothering them, whether it's in a one-on-one conversation or in a feedback survey. When you ask people a question, they typically want to give an answer. How good that answer is, though, depends on what access people have to the information that forms the basis of the answer. Most of us do a pretty lousy job of figuring out what's actually bothering us.

Ultimately, it is important to remember that criticisms of broad topics like communication are a symptom, not a diagnosis. From there, it is crucial to examine complaints more closely to determine what the solutions might be.

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- **Art Markman**, PhD, is the Annabel Irion Worsham Centennial Professor of Psychology and Marketing at the University of Texas at Austin and founding director of the program in the Human Dimensions of Organizations. He has written over 150 scholarly papers on topics including reasoning, decision-making, and motivation. His most recent book is *Bring Your Brain to Work: Using Cognitive Science to Get a Job, Do it Well, and Advance Your Career* (HBR Press).

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