

# THE PEOPLE PERSPECTIVE



BY DAVID COHEN  
For Workplace News

Early in my consulting career a senior executive provided me with some sage advice. He said there were three things an executive must do (which the majority don't) to ensure corporate and personal success. Since he was a powerful and respected person, I perked up in anticipation. According to him, effective executives differentiate themselves from the pack through these three things: communicate, communicate and communicate.

I felt disappointed by wisdom that seemed so obvious, but 15 years later, I realize how right he was.

Surveys indicate employees generally want more honest and frequent communication from executives. Yet executives perceive themselves to be honest and frank and think that communication channels are wide open.

Recently, in a discussion with a human resources vice president at a major financial institution that point was driven home. The VP was coaching the company's chairman on a series of meetings with regional and department managers. The chairman was erudite and impressive one-on-one and believed that he would do a great job. To some degree he did. The managers learned a lot about the chairman as a person and the

company's values and strategic direction.

The chairman finished those meetings feeling as though he had made a big impact on key people, but the managers didn't feel as though they had been communicated with at all. What went wrong?

For one, the chairman asked few questions. He failed to invite the managers into a dialogue. He did not ask about what they needed or wanted to know from him and he learned next to nothing about them in return.

There's no shortage of books and videos focusing on how to communicate. Experts and consultants have studied the issue well enough to know that communication is as much about receiving information as providing it. Although many executives know that intellectually, fewer practise it when and where it counts.

Is this a serious concern or just frivolous whining? Consider the impact. Employees who feel they aren't being communicated with adequately also perceive they are not trusted or respected.

Now flip that around and ask executives what they really want out of their employees. Most put loyalty, commitment, passion, and innovation high on any list. But how can they expect such emotionally charged energy from someone who feels excluded and not trusted because they are kept on a need-to-know basis?

The need for the "full story" has a root cause in the need to know, which in turn is generated by the need to feel as if one belongs. Employees who say they have a sense of belonging have three things in common. They know what's expected of them and why. They feel driven to make a contribution to the organization's success. And they trust that their contribution will be recognized.

If that's starting to sound like communication, it should, because it is through communication that such a supportive environment gets established.

Many of us in and out of business find communication challenging. Too often executives fail to recognize the additional impediment that power and position brings to their conversations.

Do employees, for example, respond positively during a conversation because you are making a real connection with them or simply out of fear and respect? How would you even know the difference?

Consider the loss, not just in meaningful connection, but in information sharing as well. After all, how much can a leader really learn about what is going on if information is buffered, filtered or hidden during conversation? How can he or she coach, advise, manage or problem-solve what is not revealed to them?

Many organizations even have communication as one facet of their core behaviours in company-wide competency models. Executives should always consider themselves “under surveillance” when it comes to how well they demonstrate core behaviours. If they fail at communication as often as surveys indicate, how much does this undercut the competency intervention?

Leaders need to be held accountable whenever employees don’t get their message or fail to feel communicated with. Creating two-way communication is about producing power, not relying on it.

Real power comes from sharing information. The more you give the more you get back. Both sides need to walk away knowing they have learned something new and built a better relationship in the process.

Here’s tips for coaching or making conversations more meaningful;

- Personal learning styles influence conversation styles. Determine one to better understand the other.
- Have both sides clarify what they want out of a conversation and use that as a measure of success.
- Direct yourself outwardly by asking questions, listening carefully, paraphrasing to be sure you understand and following through on what you learn.
- Ask for feedback a day or two after the meeting to gauge how effective a connection you made and what can be done better next time.
- Back your words by your behaviours. Always walk the talk.

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*David S. Cohen is President of Strategic Action Group, Ltd. and author of The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing, and Keeping Top Performers. His email is david@sagltd.com.*