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## How to fix cross-department communication breakdowns

# BREAKING DOWN DEPARTMENTAL BARRIERS

Corporate communicators typically focus on top-down and upward communication. Here, Angela Sinickas describes how to influence the bottom line by identifying and fixing communication breakdowns that occur as information tries to travel horizontally through an organization.

Cross-department communication is usually the territory of operational management, not corporate communications. Yet, while other managers are responsible for single-department “silos”, our work takes us across and through those silos. This helps identify any missing connections between units that might be cutting into potential revenue or increasing costs.

To conduct an operational communication assessment, map out the chronological flow of your products or services through the various work units. Then interview or work beside individuals in those units in the same sequence as the work flows. Ask questions about what information needs to be sent and received at each stage. Ask how well it’s currently working and what could make it better.

### Case study

In employee focus groups at a home health care company, I asked which subjects employees wanted to know more about. Few mentioned traditional communication topics like strategy or financial results.

Branch employees wanted to know what happened to the patients’ paperwork they express mailed every day to the corporate billing department, so they could invoice insurance companies for reimbursement. Yet each week, faxes would arrive from nameless persons in billing asking branches to immediately fax a number of documents that the branch had already sent days earlier. Then, inevitably, the next week new

faxes asked for the same information to be sent for yet a third time.

Corporate billing office staffers wanted to know why the branches didn’t send paperwork to them on time.

Enjoying a good mystery, I explored further to understand where the communication breakdowns were occurring. I started by watching paperwork be inserted into express mail packages, waited for the delivery at corporate, and followed the paper trail as far as I could.

### The problems

Branch paperwork was being processed at least a week after it arrived by express mail, which made daily deliveries an unnecessary expense.

Temporary file clerks receiving the paperwork often threw away documents when they couldn’t find a relevant folder in the file room. A particular patient’s file could be on a tall pile on the desk of any one of 200 billing and collection clerks.

Faxes from the branches came through on three different fax machines. The paperwork requested by a single fax was needed by a number of different billing clerks, who were never identified by name, so they never knew if their documents had arrived. Plus, no one monitored the incoming fax machines. Pages were literally

falling to the floor and being mixed up.

Employees in corporate weren’t allowed to phone or e-mail branch employees without a signed permission slip. This was apparently an over-reaction to a previous problem when field employees were being bombarded with requests from too many corporate employees.

### The solutions

The company hired regular-status filing staff and moved the fax machines to an attended location. It also reorganized the billing and collection departments so individuals working on the same patient pool sat together. The billers could have files on their desks only if they were actively working on them, otherwise they needed to be returned to the file room. The company abolished permission slips and encouraged conversation between billing clerks and branches.

### The outcomes

Here, the most easily quantified outcome was about US\$100,000 saved in annual express mail charges when the daily packages to corporate were reduced to twice a week.

More importantly, “days sales outstanding”, or DSO (the average number of days between the service being provided and the payment being received) dropped from a high of 186 to under 100. DSO has a significant financial impact in terms of cash flow and the ability to earn as much return on “banked” money as possible. Plus, the longer it takes to send out a bill, the less likely it will ever be paid.

When putting together findings from an operational communication assessment, you should work with operational managers individually to identify possible improvements. This way you’re working together to solve a complex issue, rather than publicly pointing out problems that make other managers look bad.

Identifying and straightening out costly, dysfunctional organizational communication processes across silos can provide another benefit. The communicator’s role begins to be viewed by senior leaders as one that directly contributes to the bottom line. Projects like these give substance to the “business” part of being a business communicator.



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