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# Supervisors Are NOT the Preferred Communicators!

The many research studies that have 'proved' that supervisors are employees' most preferred source of information on all business topics are wrong.

The conclusion is flawed because the way the studies were designed is faulty. If you are completely revamping your communication program around the idea that face-to-face communication with supervisors will best meet all your employees' information needs, *stop right now or you are doomed to fail.*

I've waited so long to get that off my chest that I'm afraid I'm going to sound like a person saying the world is really flat or the sun revolves around the earth.

When articles and speeches first began appearing in the 1980s about the supervisor being employees' preferred information source, I let it slide. To that point, the corporate communication balance had been weighted so far to the side of mass media approaches that I thought it would be healthy to pay some attention to the face-to-face channels that had been largely neglected for so long.

Now, I'm afraid, the righteous cause of supervisory communication has taken on dangerous overtones of religious mania for too many organizational communicators. Writers in the *Ragan Report*, *PR News* and *PR Reporter*, among others, have come to the point of feeling a need to defend other channels and to show the weaknesses of over-reliance on supervisors — albeit somewhat apologetically because they are arguing against well publicized "research results" that have become part of the very fabric of common wisdom.

All this debate is really a waste of time and ink. Proponents of both sides are assuming as gospel truth a finding of numerous research studies that accurately reflects employees' answers to a certain question — but the question has been asked the wrong way. As my friends in information management are fond of saying, GIGO — garbage in, garbage out.

### What the research studies ask

Most of the research studies I've seen are based on communication audits administered to company employees. Part of the audit lists a series of information sources, including a variety of print, audio-visual and human media. Then the employee is asked two questions:

- Which of these sources is *currently* your primary source of company information?
- Which of these sources is your *preferred* primary source of information?

The answer to the first one is almost always "the grapevine." The answer to the second is "my supervisor." That's what all the "research says" data are based on. It looks reasonable. It makes sense. There are statistically significant numbers to back it up. *But it is all based on an illogical premise* that becomes apparent if you change the subject from communication to consumer goods.

How about my current and preferred places to go shopping? My current primary is a grocery store; my preferred primary is Cartier. Yet, would anyone use the results of a survey designed this way to start stocking Cartier's lovely jewelry counters with potatoes and pork chops? Of course not. Yet everyone is talking and writing about making supervisors the purveyors of all kinds of information, not just on the relatively few, but important, subjects that employees really do want to hear about from their supervisors.

### What research studies should be asking

A soundly designed communication audit should ask the same two bulleted questions as above, but should *ask for the current and preferred sources subject by subject*. In other words, what are your current and preferred sources of information on company objectives? Department goals? Quality improvement? Benefits? Safety? Company financial situation? Reasons behind decisions? New products or services? What the competition is doing? News from other locations and departments? People changes and recognition? Other subjects that are important only at your own company?

When the questions are asked individually by subject (surprise, surprise) company periodicals or special brochures often will be the preferred source of detailed or highly graphic information or facts people need to see in print before they will believe the company means it. For other subjects, only top management sources will do because employees don't believe their supervisors would really know the answers. And supervisors *will be* the preferred source for a number of

subjects, generally those where a company-wide issue needs to be interpreted at a local and "my job" level. Sure, safety and quality are good ideas. But how do those apply to the job I do rather than the jobs in the department upstairs?

### What happens when you ask the right questions

Several wonderful things happen when you audit current and preferred information sources by subject:

- You will find out that the grapevine is not the primary current source on most topics; actually, it will be number one on only a couple of subjects (like finances at a privately held company or the reasons behind decisions in any organization). All the money your company has spent on communication staff and media has not been wasted.
- You will find that media you have been working on very hard, like newsletters and brochures, will be both the main current *and* preferred sources on some subjects. In other words, you will have documentary evidence that you're doing some of the right things and should be allowed to keep your job.
- You will have a fairly short and manageable list of topics that employees will want to hear about from their supervisors and a similarly short but topically different list of items from top management. You can now work with these people to help them communicate on a more realistic basis, probably on topics that they are familiar with or want to be better informed about themselves anyway.
- For every subject on which you will need to develop campaigns, you will now know the best combination of media to reach your audiences, or different media for sub-audiences with varying preferences.

Now the question you may be wondering about is: So when we find out preferred sources for each of 20 subjects, won't supervisors still come out as the most frequently listed source? The answer is: Based on all the audits I've been involved in, almost certainly not. It will depend entirely on the types of subjects you've used on the survey — to what extent they are the strategic stuff of executives' speeches or the update-oriented subjects best suited for mass media.

### How did we get so off-course?

...with the best of intentions. We were communicators. We needed to get into numbers to measure the effectiveness of what we are doing. But we, our bosses and our consultants were led astray by all the years of attitude surveys where the main concern was: "How do we compare with other companies? How do we look in comparison to the database?"

Now, I've always thought these were stupid questions to ask even for attitude surveys. If 80 percent of database companies' employees believe discrimination and sexual harassment are running rampant, but only 60 percent of your own employees feel that way, are you supposed to congratulate yourself on doing well? Shouldn't it be more important to define in advance your ideal level and then measure if you're getting closer to it over time?

Database comparison is especially irrelevant when it comes to how best to communicate your particular company's vital subjects to your own unique audience. Of what earthly use is it to know how other people's employees want to receive information on subjects of interest to them? Worse yet, to create a big enough database, many consulting firms have defined the questions — the topics and the information sources — in a purposely generic way to prevent their valuable databases from becoming tainted and, therefore, worthless. It's a whole lot

easier to just ask for a single current source and a single preferred source from a predetermined list of possibilities. The only problem with that is the client doesn't get any information that is really useful in developing targeted communication campaigns.

And this, most likely, is why it has taken me so long to publicly question these research data. During the six years I worked for a consulting firm that supported individualized approaches to communication audits, I often became frustrated with how many audit proposals were awarded to my competitors because my clients' bosses wanted to have database comparisons on information that my clients and I knew needed to be individualized to be meaningful. Saying anything before my return to corporate life would have sounded like a sales pitch or sour grapes. To borrow a line from U.S. TV talk-show host Geraldo Rivera, "Now the truth can be told."

### So what's the solution?

If you are working with a consultant on a communication audit, or gathering proposals from consultants, insist that the central part of the audit include a list of company information topics that are meaningful to your company, based on your company's mission, objectives, business plans and employee concerns. Insist that the information sources listed be specific to the ones your employees have available or might like to have available in the future. And if you still can't educate away your boss' fatalistic obsession with databases, add a few attitude questions about communication to your survey and compare your results with the database (satisfaction overall with communication, credibility of information, etc.).

The ideal communication subjects and information sources for your own survey can best be gleaned through executive interviews and employee focus groups. If the survey doesn't have the right lists available for responses, it will provide misleading data. For example, if your employees' top current source of information on competitors is the mass media or trade journals and these are not available to choose from on the survey, you may walk away with the mistaken impression that their top source is the third most prevalent one that you did happen to list on the survey.

For each business topic that will be on your survey, ask four questions:

1. How interested are employees in the information?
2. How well informed do they believe they are?
3. What is their current major source of information?
4. What is their preferred source of information?

### A fool-proof communication blueprint

Analysis of these results will provide a blueprint to develop communication plans and budgets.

- You'll know which subjects employees are most interested in learning about, in order.
- You'll find out which subjects employees are best informed about, in order.

- Subtracting the scores for #2 from #1, you'll be able to measure the size of the information gaps for each subject. Rank ordering these and comparing them with your company's plans and objectives will set your priority subjects for communication in the next year — with *de facto* management agreement in advance when you demonstrate that employees' information gaps need to be filled before employees can understand and buy into what the company wants them to do in support of these goals.

- For each subject with a large information gap that you think you've been communicating heavily about already, you can check to see if the current source they're getting the information from is the same as their preferred. If not, you can change your media plan accordingly.

- For each subject, you can analyze demographic differences in the results of the four questions to develop a targeted campaign using the best combination of media for each sub-group. For example, let's say people want to hear a lot more about safety than they're getting, and their top two preferred sources are supervisors and meetings, instead of the current sources of posters and company newsletters. Looking at your demographic data, you may find that supervisors as a group are just as interested in safety as their employees, but no better informed. Your suggested campaign might be to educate supervisors about this topic in an interactive way that will help them tailor the safety messages to the needs of their own work groups.

- For each information source, you'll be able to identify the top subjects that people want to hear about through that medium. This will determine your contents list for the next year of publications, brochures and video programs. It will also give you a list of four or five subjects that supervisors should be prepared to handle. It will provide a list of topics that executives should be prepared to share with employees whenever they come before an employee audience.

- You will have a baseline to compare over time how effective your efforts have been. Have you begun closing some information gaps on key company subjects? Have you been using employees' preferred information sources on some subjects? This is measurable performance. It might be enough to get you into the company bonus plan.

### **This is not rocket science, nor does it need a NASA budget**

Even if you can't afford, or can't sell to management the idea of doing, a statistically measurable communication audit survey, you can probably put together a number of employee focus groups to get answers to the questions I've described earlier. While you shouldn't use focus group information to compare progress over time, because the small number of people involved and absence of truly random selection would prevent reliable repeatability of results, you will at least have directional information at a macro level on all these subjects. That is a whole lot more valuable than just gut instinct — or using the results of previous "research studies" to dump all the responsibility for communication on terrified supervisors.

And don't let a full-blown survey scare you. I developed my first audit, following this approach, in 1981. Thankfully, I didn't start with any existing survey forms, just a number of IABC talks I had heard on the topic of measurement. Instead, I started with the crazy idea that if effective communication of a particular message means identifying the best medium and timing for getting it to each sub-audience ... then an audit should be designed around determining the best medium for each different type of message.

Since I used in-house marketing research and MIS resources, the total cost of the audit was U.S. \$690 and a whole lot of my own free time. Of course, today I would fine-tune a number of mistakes with the first audit, but it was good enough to completely revamp my company's internal communication program, most of which outlasted my tenure (and a later audit) by seven years.

### **In conclusion, at last!**

- Supervisors are not your employees' preferred information source on most company subjects.

- Take the time to find out, either in informal focus groups or on a custom-tailored survey form, what subjects your own work force and management believe need the most communication content; then identify the current and preferred sources of information for each subject.

- If you can't buy the consulting for such a project, find an IABC buddy or mentor who has been through one and do it yourself.

And don't ever, ever again let yourself be bamboozled by anyone spouting, "as we all know, research says" ... anything. Check out how the study question was asked and give it a reality check.

Remember, statistics can lie, and not every emperor is fully dressed.

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