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Ask the Expert...with Angela Sinickas

Q: I'm looking for some generic statistics to reinforce a message I'm delivering at my next senior managers' meeting – namely communication responsibility sits with all, not just the comms team. Clear outcomes from our staff survey show that:

- **employees like to hear operational change information (items concerning their day to day jobs) from their line manager; and**
- **employees also like their line manager to explain about company strategy, how we're delivering against targets, etc.**

I believe that this is quite usual due to the level of trust and established rapport with the manager – can you direct me to any studies that confirm or deny this?

A: The numbers from my own survey database confirm your first bullet point but not the second.

Regardless of how trustworthy immediate managers are, they're NOT a preferred source on topics that are perceived to be beyond their area of expertise, such as company strategy and company financial results.

Preferred sources of information

There's an article Melcrum published in 2004 in which I documented how often either supervisors or staff meetings (conducted by supervisors) were among the top two preferred sources on a variety of topics at a number of companies. Here's the link. The surveys I've conducted since 2004 follow the same trends.

You'll see how rarely supervisors were chosen for topics not related to employees' jobs. Elsewhere in that article you'll see my explanation of why common wisdom believes supervisors are a preferred source on all topics – bad research well publicized over 20 years ago.

Senior leaders set strategy straight

On topics like company strategy and financial results, if people are a preferred source, it's generally higher-level people. You can look at another article Melcrum published on what my database shows about employees' preferences in learning about company and business unit strategy.

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Preferences vary quite a bit by job type, but overall, publications and the intranet were far more preferred than management as a source on company strategy. However, when you look at business unit strategy or business unit results, management sources quite often are more preferred than the written channels.

All these statistics, however, show trends over a wide range of companies. At any one company, their results can be quite different. That's why it's important to conduct research with your own audience on your own organization's important topics.

Cascade inefficiencies

Another article that affects your management presentation is on how inefficient "cascading" information through management ranks can be.

All these data lead me to conclude that the comms department needs to do a really good job of communicating the big picture strategy and progress on results to everyone. Of course, we'd be quoting senior management, but we need to make sure that information gets out.

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Then we need to prepare all levels of management to discuss how the big picture affects their work groups and business units. Their job isn't so much to give out information as to put information into local context, to answer employees' questions of: "So how do I fit in and what do you want me to do?"

So I agree management has an important communication role, but it's different from I think most communicators believe it to be.

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