



ANGELA SINICKAS

Exploring the differences between two-way and one-way communication

THE IMPACT OF DIALOGUE VERSUS BRIEFING

We all “know” that two-way communication is better than one-way, but why is that the case and how exactly does it make a difference? Angela Sinickas mines her survey database to find those differences and some answers.

While face-to-face communication is not most employees’ preferred information source on most topics, it does play a key role in helping them feel more committed to helping their organizations succeed and to feel more satisfied with the communication experience.

The data in the table in Figure 1 (see right) were drawn from 23 of the companies in the Sinickas database where employees were asked how well informed they felt on both of these issues:

- The organization’s strategy.
- How they can contribute to that strategy.

First we separated the 23 organizations into two categories, the half who were better informed about one topic or the other and the half who were less informed. We also looked at other subsets of the data for the organizations where employees were more committed to helping their employers succeed or where they were more satisfied with internal communication overall. Then we looked at how each half-group answered a host of other questions related to face-to-face communication and identified how much difference there was in how positively the better and worse halves of each group answered each of those questions.

Understanding the table

Figure 1 identifies the face-to-face communication questions that were answered differently by the more positive and less positive groups identified in the column headings. The numbers in the table show how many percentage points separated the more positive subgroups from the less positive subgroups.

- A negative number means an opposite relationship exists; for example, the employees most committed to their companies’ success are less likely to say meetings with senior leaders are useful.
- Differences of less than 10 percentage points are generally too small to be statistically meaningful.
- The dark borders identify the most important communication factors that could be related to the positive outcomes in each column, although no cause-and-effect relationship is being proposed based solely on these data.
- That shaded rows highlight factors that might imply two-way dialogue rather than one-way briefings.



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Conclusions from the data

Understanding of an organization’s overall strategy and an employee’s role in it seem to be related mostly to one-way briefing rather than dialogue. However, it seems having enough face-to-face communication is more important for understanding an employee’s role in the strategy than understanding the strategy itself.

Aspects of two-way communication become more important in gaining commitment to executing the strategy, especially for those who have more access to meetings with senior leaders. The most significant outcome of two-way interaction seems to be with employees’ overall satisfaction with the internal communication system, with four of the seven key factors implying that dialogue is occurring, both with supervisors and senior leaders.

Next steps

The surveys I’ve conducted for clients weren’t designed to answer the question Melcrum is addressing in this report¹, namely, “What’s the impact of dialogue vs. briefing in the understanding of company strategy?” However, if this is an issue you want to probe with your own employees, questions you might want to include in your own survey would be to what extent employees felt:

- They were able to ask questions about their role in implementing the strategy.
- They received useful answers to their questions.
- Two-way discussion about the strategy increased their commitment to helping achieve it.

1. This article appears in the Melcrum report, *From cascade to dialogue: How to encourage productive conversations in organizations* produced exclusively for Melcrum’s Strategic Communication Research Forum. See the box, right, for more information.

Figure 1: Outcomes related to face-to-face communication

Potential Face-to-Face Communication Factors:	More Likely to Have These Positive Outcomes: <i>(number of percentage points separating the more positive half from the less positive half)</i>			
	Understand Company Strategy (23 Orgs.)	Understand Role in Contributing to Strategy (23 Orgs.)	Committed to Helping Company Succeed (6 Orgs.)	Satisfied with Communication (10 Orgs)
Receive the "right amount" of face-to-face communication	8	13	-5	9
Supervisor explains company direction	4	10	-9	9
Supervisor communicates what employees can do to help reach strategy	10	11	2	11
Supervisor keeps employees informed on information they want to know	13	2	*	24
Supervisor conducts effective meetings	8	-1	*	10
Supervisors listens, welcomes questions and feedback	4	2	8	9
Senior leaders keep employees informed on company information	10	11	-5	8
Senior leaders explain company direction	5	10	-14	-4
Senior leaders explain reasons behind decision	9	3	-9	10
Senior leaders create an environment that makes asking questions comfortable	1	4	-5	-13
Access to staff meetings	-2	-6	-2	-2
Access to meetings with senior leaders	-3	-10	9	-11
Usefulness of staff meetings	1	3	-1	2
Usefulness of meetings with senior leaders	0	8	-11	13
Satisfaction with upward communication	-8	-8	#	12

* Too few companies with data from which to draw a conclusion.

Only three companies were asked about both engagement and upward communication, too few to draw a conclusion; however, while 91-93 percent said they were committed to making the company successful, satisfaction with upward communication ranged from 55- 79 percent favorable, suggesting there's not much of a connection between these two items.

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