

Effective Employee Communications: Avoid the “Telephone Game”

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At her birthday party a few weeks ago, my daughter and her friends were sitting around the dining room table eating birthday cake when they had the idea to play the “telephone game”. For those who don’t remember, or don’t have school age children, this is the game where the first person begins the game by whispering her message to the second person, and the second person whispers what she heard to the third person, and so on, until the message has been whispered around the table. The last person announces the message that she heard to the rest of the group and they see how close the last whispered message is to the first whispered message. Needless to say, the last person rarely hears the same thing that the first person says. This usually leads to much giggling and then an investigation to see where the “breakdown” occurred.

Employee communications can sometimes feel like the telephone game. Your intention is to deliver an important strategy or change to employees: You begin by telling your management team, which is then responsible for sharing with their supervisors, and they are to relay it to their staff. At the end of the day you find that somewhere along the line the message is misinterpreted and the ensuing chaos leads to an investigation on where the breakdown occurred (not much giggling when this happens).

There are ways to avoid some of the pitfalls of mass employee communication. Here are a few:

1. Make sure that your message is clear at all levels in the organization. For example, one of messages sent around the birthday table included a reference to Harry Potter. Unfortunately, not all of the girls had read Harry Potter so were not familiar with the words. As a result, those that didn’t understand what was being said used their own words to fill in the gap.

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To make sure that your message is clear, know your audience and be sure to use references and words that all can understand so that there is no room for misinterpretation. One way to do this is to have someone who may be less familiar with the content to read your message and make sure that it is understandable.

2. Reinforce your message. In the telephone game, the farther the message was given from the originator, the more likely the chance of misinterpretation. If the original message had been whispered to more than one person, or was repeated several times, then the last person to hear the message would most likely have gotten the correct one.

Whenever possible, deliver your message directly to the entire audience. Your passion for organization success can be extremely motivating. However, in some organizations this is not possible, so you should give your managers the information and resources necessary to reinforce your message to their employees. Encourage managers to have department meetings or write an article for the company newsletter or internal website. If a consistent message is received by employees from various means, the likelihood of receiving the correct message is greatly improved.

3. Anticipate the challenges or obstacles. In our birthday telephone game, the challenge was my younger daughter. It was guaranteed that when she heard the message that she would not relay it correctly, whether on purpose or not.

Anticipating challenges or obstacles is not easy to do. In some organizations they are hidden. Having an open door policy and using multiple points of contact are ways to take your message directly to the employees and potentially bypassing the obstacle. In some organizations, they are obvious but have influence in the organization. In this situation it is best to get “buy-in” before it is shared with the masses. If my older daughter had spoken first to my younger daughter and made her feel that they had worked together, then most likely she would not intentionally relay the message incorrectly.

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These are only a few illustrations on how to improve employee communications. We'd like to hear about your organization, some of the challenges you face, and how you may have met the challenge. Please feel free to contact me at linda@blueprairiegroup.com and let me know your challenges and success stories. Your solutions to effective employee communications may be published in a future edition of the Prairie Post!