

## COMMUNICATION

# CASCADING COMMUNICATION

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The most reliable and effective way to get an organization moving in the same direction is for leaders to come out of their meetings with clear communication about what was decided, promptly relay that message to their direct reports, and have them do the same for their own direct reports. We call this “cascading communication” because it begins the *structured but interpersonal* process of rolling key messages down through the organization.

If this sounds ridiculously simple, that’s because it is. And yet it doesn’t happen in the vast majority of companies in spite of the fact that it is so effective. Part of the reason for its effectiveness has to do with its contrast to more formal means of communication. Over the past 15 to 20 years, employees have grown accustomed to inconsistent, untimely, and manufactured electronic communication from their leaders. That’s not meant to sound cynical; it’s just reality. Most leaders are more than adept at sending out email messages and giving presentations, and yet they still struggle to communicate effectively because employees are skeptical about the authenticity of the message.

<sup>82</sup> (LENCIONI, P144)

Cascading communication provides a great opportunity to change all that. Amazingly, when employees in different parts of an organization hear their leaders saying the same things after meetings, they actually start to believe that alignment and clarity might be possible.

One of my earliest clients was a global software company that had offices in just about every part of the world. Unsurprisingly, employees in different offices felt disconnected from one another, regardless of how many email announcements, videoconference messages, and company shirts they received.

And then the executive team started implementing cascading communication; leaving their meetings and going back to their direct reports with a common set of messages. Those direct reports were then charged with relaying those same messages to their teams.

I remember the day that the woman who headed HR in Australia called her colleague in Germany to tell him about something her boss had just told her that was happening at corporate. Shocked, her German colleague said, "Hey, my boss just told me the same thing!" They felt a greater sense of alignment because of that one simple instance of consistent, informal messaging than they did after receiving any of the other types of communication.

## *Keys to Cascading Communication*

- 1** Message consistency from one leader to another
- 2** Timeliness of delivery
- 3** Live, real-time communication

This process starts toward the end of meetings, a time when leaders are usually trying their best to get out the door. That's when someone needs to ask the \$100,000 question: "Hey, what are we going to go back and tell our people?"

For the next few minutes, sometimes longer, leaders should review their discussions from the meeting and decide which of their decisions are ready to be communicated and which are not. Often it's during this process that they discover that they were not on the same page about what they thought they had decided. Only then can they get real clarity by settling on the decisions they've made. This will certainly take more time, but the cost of not doing it is often great.

I worked for a company early in my career that was struggling and needed to cut costs. After a long executive staff meeting, it was decided that there would be a freeze on hiring new employees until the revenue situation at the company had been improved.

The head of human resources left the staff meeting and sent out an email announcing the hiring freeze. Within five minutes, two of her peers who had been in the meeting were in her office protesting the new policy.

"I didn't think the freeze applied to sales," pleaded one executive. The other executive chimed in, "And there's no way that we're going to cut back on engineers, are we?"

The team was put in the position of having to retract its announcement and amend its policy, which created tension among team members, not to mention a loss of credibility in the eyes of employees. All of this because they didn't take a few minutes to get clear about what they were really committing to at the end of a staff meeting.

As important as alignment is, what teams shouldn't do is wordsmith those messages to death and robotically read from the same script. Instead, they need to clarify the main points and then go to their teams to communicate those points in their own words.

*It's critical that leaders do this during a short and consistent time frame.* If one member of the team goes back to her staff to convey the messages right after the meeting and someone else waits a week to do so, there will be understandable confusion and disappointment among

employees. That's not to say that it has to happen in the same moment. However, a 24-hour period following a meeting is a helpful benchmark.

*Many leaders ask if they can communicate the results of a meeting using email or even voicemail. The answer is no.* Although these tools are certainly more efficient than having to communicate live, they are drastically less effective. The best way to do cascading communication is face-to-face.

Another best practice when implementing cascading communication is to do it with an entire group of direct reports at the same time instead of one by one. Aside from being more efficient, it ensures that they hear the same message at the same time, and they can benefit from one another's questions and observations. This advice may sound extremely basic. But then again, most organizations are unhealthy precisely because they *aren't* doing the basic things, which require discipline, persistence, and follow-through more than sophistication or intelligence.