How to Play Offense in Communication

Description

I am fortunate to meet with many people. In the last few weeks, I have met with people in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Arlington, Virginia; Des Moines, Iowa; Lafayette, Louisiana; and Wildwood, Florida. Before I do a workshop and/or presentation, I ask, "What would you like the attendees to leave with? What is one of your biggest challenges?"

While there are a variety of responses, one constant is *communication.* In my new book, *The Calling*, which is due out in September, I address this issue.

If you would like to improve communication in your company or community, here is a common challenge and a suggested solution:

Challenge: Though there is great effort to communicate well, leaders still hear statements such as: *No one told me* or *We need better communication* or *Why do they know things I did not know?*

Solution: Play offense in communication. Here's how:

Step 1. Meet with those you are communicating with. In the workplace, these would be your direct reports. State that the goal is to have excellent communication. Then, ask each attendee to define what they feel excellent communication looks like. This exercise shows that there are different opinions on this subject. Let the group define excellent communication; otherwise, it's like trying to hit a moving target.

Step 2. To better define the question in Step 1, have each person share a time when they felt communication was excellent. After everyone weighs in, take time to discuss what made for the excellent communication.

Step 3. Have each person share a time when communication fell short. You will find the group is already understanding the challenge you have as a leader. The group will also grasp that communication may be better than they thought and realize what a difficult job a leader has in making sure everyone feels communication is excellent.

Step 4. Cover what information you currently provide to the group and spell out why that information is important. This is connecting the dots. At times, staff are not fully aware of *why* they are receiving the information you are providing.

Step 5. Go around the room and ask each person to share what additional information they feel is important to them. We now have the items that, when read by everyone, lead to excellent communication.

Step 6. Ask the group *how* they would like the information provided to them. Also agree on *when*. For example: *Every Tuesday at noon, an email will go to the group.* Or *These items will be provided monthly*

, or *These items* (an equipment issue, a new employee, etc.) *will be provided on a just-in-time basis.* So, we now have agreed on the definition of excellent communication, discussed some solid examples of good and not-so-good communication experiences, and clarified what information will be shared and when.

Now for the missing link…

Step 7. Talk about accountability. My experience is not all employees read the information when it is provided. Often less than 50 percent open an email and/or read the information that is posted. Pose this question to the group: *We now clearly know what you feel will create excellent communication, so how can we make sure you open the email and/or read the posted information?* If you can, provide some examples of recent communication and give the percentage of opened emails. Then, let them create the accountability standards.

Ask what the consequences should be for people who are not following the standards they agreed to. You will find this to be a very good conversation. One item is they will ask that the names of people who open and do not open information be posted. They will also share that opening the email and/or reading what is posted is a standard of behavior and any violation should be addressed in the same way other standard violations are handled. They will want to celebrate when they are at "100 percent read."

I find that leaders who follow the steps above solve many of their communication issues. The workforce feels good about being part of the solution. And because employees end up with more clarity around what's going on, what they're being asked to do, and *why* they're being asked to do it, engagement, performance, and productivity skyrocket.

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