

Helping leaders re-engage their people



By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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TORONTO, CANADA: Engagement and leadership are arguably two of the most important aspects of business development and organisational change in the 21st century. Bill Quirke, a leading authority on internal communications and corporate change in Europe and the US speaking at the IABC World Conference last week, says leaders should be interested in staff, and staff should be interested in their leaders.

Quirke says many leaders that he engages with ask him: "Why do I need to communicate? What do I need this for?" He argues that the impact of communication today is highly questionable, and communicators therefore have a huge opportunity to engage leaders and ensure that they become key enablers within their business units.

Employees are influential

"When you are trying to reengage people, building trust and accountability is critical," says Quirke. He says employees are influential and come across as advocates of opinions, which also means they are less trusting and respectful and their organisations; opinions leaders consider employees more credible than senior leaders, and are becoming increasingly more sceptical about spin; and employees are as credible as newspaper article.

Much research has shown that employees consider communication as a cornerstone of any organisation, and yet despite the billions of dollars spent on communication, there is little research to show that employee engagement has increased at all as a result. Results are only obtained from an impact level measurement analysis and not from assessing whether communication is taking place.

Quirke said that 100% of employees think they are doing a great job, but research shows that only 50% of employees say they understand their jobs and what is expected of them. Therefore, he asks, "How many people are passionately doing the wrong job?"

Leaders set the tone

Leaders set the tone, the culture and the degree of engagement in the organisation. While most leaders agree that this is vital and important, most of them place communication at the bottom of the priority list - which completely contradicts the entire ethos of management leadership.

"Communication isn't seen as a hard business tool, and more leaders should see communication as a means to an end... otherwise you are paying lots of money to lots of people, who are doing the wrong things," says Quirke. The best way to

engage employees is through their immediate line managers who are able to engage their staff face-to-face and ensure they have accessibility to the right information that will align them to the right goals to deliver the business strategy.

Employee engagement, Quirke suggests, is nothing more than getting employees to focus on existing effort, while growing that amount of effort. The challenge for communicators is that the clearer the objective, the better the work performance and delivery - "communication drives clarity and clarity drives motivation," he says.

"Who has the problem?"

"Who has the problem? Leadership has the problem in leading and directing people. It's amazing what we do in organisations to destroy engagement," says Quirke. People don't feel that they belong or are valued. They further don't feel pride in the company or what it is trying to achieve. Putting words on a poster is not going to change employee perceptions and get their buy-in.

"It will raise awareness, but will achieve very little; while costing a lot of money," adds Quirke. For many employees, their work ethos is 'I have no idea where we are going, but by gosh I will help us get there.'

Values must always most aligned to hardcore behaviour in order to deliver actual engagement. Many organisations have wonderful values statement, but never tell their staff how they should behave to deliver on those. The two most important values that often come out are customer centricity and innovation - and yet in the majority of cases the companies have customer satisfaction issues and no innovation in the long-term strategy.

Internal communication is very efficient at sending out multiple messages on a variety of platform, yet never follows up to ensure that messages are clearly understood and lived by. The challenge is that there is no two-way dialogue, creating an opportunity to lead the leaders in guiding information through to all employees. "The rules of leadership communication are not the same as formal communication. Formal communication is about planting snippets of information in the minds of audiences, which will not result in effective understanding," says Quirke.

Seven deadly sins

Quirke suggests there are seven deadly sins that makes leadership bad at communicating to employees:

1. leaders do not invest time in communication;
2. do not see the business benefits in communication;
3. see communication as the internal communication team's job;
4. give inconsistent messages and signals and do not walk the talk;
5. communicate in a way that is rational rather than emotional - use management to speak and impersonal styles;
6. do not translate corporate rhetoric into concrete specifics; and
7. as a team, are inconsistent, lead and spin.

Good leaders:

- are transparent,
- are accountable,
- share information as it happens,
- engage with people face-to-face where possible - at least to line managers,
- understand people's communication styles,
- speak with passion and conviction, and
- own up to organisational challenges - while sharing a clear direction and vision of the organisation with all staff.

At the end of the day, what makes a good leader is whether or not people can resonate with them.

Employees want to be communicated with in simple terms, with information that resonates with them, and on their terms. Communication must be remembered, what gets remembered is reinforced, and what is reinforced is done.

More information, as well as podcasts and vodcasts from the 2010 IABC World Conference in Canada will be available at www.talk2us.co.za.

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