

> BY CHRIS PETERSEN

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+ Tower of *Babble*

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR EMPLOYEES IS A MATTER OF LISTENING TO THEM ONCE IN A WHILE.

According to the Bible, the Tower of Babel was an

attempt to build a tower that reached all the way to Heaven that was foiled by God changing the languages of all who were building it. The lesson intended by the story is that God doesn't like anyone trying to crowd into his domain, but there's an alternate lesson for the world of business, too.

Anyone in a leadership position in the business world knows how something is said is just as important as what is said. Managers can spend hours talking at their employees, but if the words they're saying don't connect with those employees, they may as well be speaking a different language. Employees tune out, vital information is missed and plans fall apart, much like the Tower of Babel.

There's no shortage of advice out there for managers and business leaders to become more effective communicators. Often, this advice will center on the type of language managers use or the tone they take with employees. Some experts believe in being aggressive and to the point, while others encourage being supportive and quick with a compliment. Some experts' advice centers on stressing the overall goals, and other advice concentrates on narrowing the focus to each employee's personal responsibility.

All of that is well and good, but it ignores what might be the

most important aspect of how managers communicate with their employees – recognizing the gulf that exists between them and finding ways to address it. Many experts on corporate communication believe managers can't be effective communicators preaching from up on a hill or barking orders from behind a desk. Many believe the key to effective manager-employee communication is to admit that the two sides already speak different languages. Translating what you want to say so that your employees truly hear you may be as simple as keeping your mouth shut.

The Great Divide

The fundamental difference between managers and employees is plain enough to see, but that doesn't mean managers are aware of it when they talk to their employees, says David Levine, author of "Don't Just Talk, Be Heard!" He says that by virtue of the manager's position over them, most employees assume by default that managers don't understand them.

"Perception is a big part of effective communication, especially when it has to do with people's negative expectations of you," Levin says. For example, he notes an example from his book about a senior vice president who told a group of 1,000 employees about the difficulty he had finding storage for his

50-foot yacht.

The difference between the two worlds also results in managers often speaking a different language when it comes to context. Ron Ashkenas, managing partner of Schaffer Consulting in Connecticut, says managers often don't see the big picture when they talk to employees and lose sight of why employees should consider what they're saying to be important. "Managers get sort of steeped in why they're doing things and the nuances of it and how it fits into basic strategies, and they just assume everyone else knows that," he says.

Real Emotion

At first glance, this barrier between managers and employees may seem insurmountable, but there are ways managers can tailor their communication to make themselves understood. Levine suggests business leaders take a page from political leaders and introduce emotional elements into their communication with employees. He says politicians such as John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan filled their speeches with appeals to Americans' emotions, and, as such, were regarded as great communicators despite the gulfs that existed between them and average people.

While planning to speak with employees, Levine suggests managers ask themselves how they would feel if they heard someone else saying those things to them. He says the key is not simply acting more emotional, but articulating emotion more effectively. For example, just saying that you recognize how stressed out an employee is can go a long way toward bringing that employee on board with whatever needs to be asked of him or her. He says "leading with the relationship" takes a little extra time, but the results can be well worth it when it means greater understanding and more buy-in from employees.

Authenticity also is important, so Levine says reviewing your comments with a peer can be very important. "The biggest mistakes people make at this level are that they don't work with someone else and they become more and more isolated," he says.

Making a Connection

Ashkenas says managers also need to learn to listen as well as they want their employees to if they expect employees to pay attention to them. "They usually have a full plate of things and priorities, and the manager comes along and gives them something

else to do," he says. "If they don't help their people reprioritize, their people end up prioritizing on their own, which might not lead to the same priorities the manager has."

By providing more specifics, managers can help employees avoid feeling overwhelmed by requests and be more comfortable with their new assignments. A significant part of helping employees prioritize is listening to them. Simply treating employees like intelligent human beings can be the key to establishing strong manager-employee bonds, instead of slick talk and high-minded platitudes about the greater good of the company. "A lot of managers think it's all about what you say, but establishing a dialogue also is important," Ashkenas says.

"We generally regard the best communicators as those who are the best listeners," says John McKee, life coach and author of "Career Wisdom 101: Proven Strategies to Ensure Workplace Success" and "The Plan."

"The problem is that [executives] haven't developed very good communication skills, which begin with a heightened ability to listen," McKee adds. He suggests asking open-ended questions that better establish a dialogue than simple yes/no questions.

These methods might sound simplistic or even like a waste of time, but without them, you could find yourself wondering if anybody's really listening to you. *mt*

