

Employee Communications: The Foundation of Employee Involvement

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I want to preface this session with a qualifier. Abe Lincoln said, "You may fool all the people some of the time, you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time." In the end truth will prevail. Everything I advocate here only works in organizations when it is the truth, not a slickly constructed facade. As Coca Cola knows, people do know the real thing when they see it. They understand the importance of the time worn phrase "actions speak louder than words." Effective communications work well to facilitate employee involvement in organizations where what is said matches what is done.

We in Employee Communications at Federal Express are fortunate in this regard. Our efforts work because at the heart of the operation is a philosophy based on human dignity, self-worth and respect for the individual.

Here is the way we express it:

Federal express is dedicated to the principle that our people are our most important asset. As an employee of Federal Express, you are part of the finest team of professionals in our industry. The People/Service/Profit philosophy of our company is based on the belief that motivated and conscientious people will provide the necessary professional service to ensure profits and our continued growth.

An effective communication program cannot mask a weak employee commitment philosophy, at best creating the illusion of concern for the employee is a short term proposition. So now let us begin to explore how communications work in a company with a strong employee commitment philosophy to facilitate employee involvement that is directed at achieving organizational success.

Organizational communication includes a macro level and a micro level. Macro level communications are directed to the total organization. Micro level communications occur within each of the smallest units composing the organization. This discussion focuses only on organizational communication at the macro level.

When you ask most people about the employee communication function in their organization they usually talk about macro level programs, things they can see and touch—the company newspaper, video programming, the management magazine, the mass media of their organization that broadcast corporate messages to all corners of the operation. These communications are important because they act as organizational cement bonding all of the organization's parts into a corporate culture of common beliefs, values, and goals.

At Federal Express we have an extensive macro level communications program. Roughly three-fourths of our employee communication resource is devoted to creating messages via print and non-print media. Last year we produced 78 video programs, 52 employee publications, 12 management publications, 23 posters, 130 project communications, and 10 major meetings.

Macro communications facilitate employee involvement in two major ways: 1) building a climate of trust and, 2) unifying involved employees in a common mission for achieving organizational success.

Climate communications reflect an organization's human resource philosophy. They are concerned not as much by what information is communicated but how it is communicated. Individuals in organizations sense how their organization feels about them by how the organization communicates with them. The goal of climate communications is to build trust between the employee and the organization. It is difficult to conceive of an employee who wants to contribute to the organization without believing that the organization is concerned about his/her welfare.

Mission communications serve a second purpose toward encouraging employee involvement. They direct and unify each employee's efforts toward the ultimate goal of organizational success. These communications focus on the organization's mission in terms of facilitating goal congruence and sharing the organization's vision of the future.

I want to focus on climate communications first, and show how they build trust among the employee population as a whole. At Federal Express we build trust in several ways. The act of communicating itself communicates that the organization cares about the employee. I have often heard it said around our company, "I appreciate that the company cares enough to go to great lengths to communicate with me." Having an Employee Communications Department with sixty employees confirms the company's desire to communicate with its employees.

We have several communication programs sending clear messages to employees that the company cares about them as individuals and wants to earn their trust. Our Open Door policy insures that any employee can approach anyone in upper management with their question or concern. Our Guaranteed Fair Treatment procedures provide employees, who feel they have been treated unfairly, a five step process by which the complaint is aired through successive levels of management, and if necessary appealed to a board of review chaired by the CEO.

Each spring a company-wide upward communication survey is administered to all 46,000 employees, asking for their feedback on such items as their manager's effectiveness, confidence in upper management, benefits, pay and company pride. Each workgroup and manager meets to discuss the group's survey results. Then they decide on actions for improving areas of communication inadequacies.

We strive to operate under a receiver oriented communication philosophy. We attempt to keep the employee in mind when we develop our communication plans and programs. This approach stems from two beliefs: the person doing the job knows best what is needed to perform effectively and, communication to employees should be based on what the employees need and want to know. We have a standing rule to analyze an employee group's needs on a subject prior to developing any message. On a much broader scale, we periodically check via surveys and employee focus sessions to see if employees are receiving and understanding our macro level messages. One method we installed over a year ago, called EmpComm, is a monthly phone survey. Each member of our department makes phone calls to a group of employees to appraise the effectiveness of a recent communication effort. Two years ago we undertook a company-wide communication need assessment which identified the top five communication priorities of the overall employees as well as priorities at the divisional level.

The final example of macro level communications discussed here is the most important to our Employee Communications Department because we are the company group responsible for building a communication climate of openness and candor. I remember sitting in a meeting some years ago with our chairman, Fredrick W. Smith, and hearing him state explicitly to our department that he wanted communications to cover the whole picture, to "show warts and all." We do not hide much in our corporate media. We believe if there is something wrong, the best way to get it fixed is to get it out in the open. We tackle the hard issues head-on. Sometimes we have to take unpopular positions and sometimes suffer politically in the short run. Over the long haul, however, our open communication policy and dedication to candid honest coverage of corporate issues builds trust with employees that bonds them to Federal Express.

We encourage employees to speak up on the issues through our brown bag lunches. This program, started four years ago, places our highest level officers in lunchrooms throughout the company during the lunch hour. While the employees eat their lunch the officer delivers an informal talk on a timely corporate issue or project. The floor is always open for questions and voicing concerns.

Total freedom of press does not exist in a corporation, but we get about as close to it as possible. Our major corporate employee publication is called "UpDate," and over the years it has established itself as a credible and reliable source of information for our employees. We regularly survey employee perceptions of all our corporate media. The surveys indicate that the balanced reporting style and the inclusion of employee questions on timely, sometimes sensitive issues, contribute to "UpDate's" reputation as a credible publication.

I do not mean to imply that this happens without problems. It is difficult to protect the credibility of any publication or communication program. Let me relate to you what happens when things take a down turn, specifically with "UpDate." This scenario will illustrate the impact macro communications can have on a company's climate of trust. When development of the now terminated ZapMail service was initiated three years ago, our corporate media began covering the young and promising project. We are a project oriented company. It is part of our entrepreneurial heritage to innovate new and better ways to do things, particularly when they directly effect our customers. This project was the grandest of all the projects. It was a whole new way of doing business. It meant we would start moving customer documents by electronic transmission and replication vs. physically via aircraft. It is not our policy to wait for projects to mature before they are announced to our employees. We start the communication process as soon as a project is officially blessed, which usually comes in the form of budget approval. This strategy has two primary benefits. First, it starts employees thinking about the new project's impact and implications. As they start thinking they start talking, and before long we have a think tank 46,000 strong, involved in the company's future directions via these new projects. Given our open communication philosophy, employee ideas and concerns bubble upward to those people on the project who can use them to make changes and enhancements. Second, employees see this sharing of advanced information as evidence that they are partners in the company's future because they are not left uninformed. They feel they are a part of the inner circle, involved in the plans charting our company's direction. They feel they are being trusted with information that the company does not have to share with them and the company is confident in their ability to handle it.

Operating with this philosophy we started sharing the project with our employees as it developed. When we launched ZapMail we did it with flair. We held an international teleconference on a Sunday afternoon. We invited all our employees to hotel meeting rooms throughout the country to view a live TV broadcast, originating from seven uplink locations in the U.S., Canada, and England, and costing \$1.2 million.

We chose the theme "Mission II" to premiere ZapMail as the best addition to the company's successful product line. Most employees at those Sunday afternoon meetings believed that ZapMail was the company's second mission and the key to our future. Well, things did not work out as expected. The market did not beat a path to our door to try the new 2½ hour service, and ZapMail volumes did not skyrocket the way projections said they would. Looking back at our communications during 1984 and 1985, and particularly the coverage given in our "rock of credibility," "UpDate," we reported what was given to us about ZapMail, and in organizations that is all you have. You take it on faith and print it. It is, however, a fact of organizational life that those closest to a project are careful

about what kind of information gets dispersed about it. they tend to accentuate the positive, and we took that kind of information and reported it, much of it within the pages of "UpDate."

In April of 1985, we conducted a survey called the Employee Communication Need Assessment. In that research effort we asked our employees what they thought about "UpDate" and our other corporate media. Most of the feedback was positive, but a portion of it served as a sobering reminder of how big a part macro level communications play in building credibility and trust within an organization. Employee feedback told us that ". . . communications often painted a far too rosey picture of the company's situation, especially with ZapMail." We learned that the success of future employee communications efforts may be based more on **how** we communicate rather than **what** we communicate.

In summary, corporate media programs at the macro level can cultivate a climate of openness and concern for the individual which builds trust. Organizations that care about their employees utilize newspapers, video networks, and other internal media to send macro level messages across the total organization, affirming this care.

The motivation factor in an organization starts with trust, and trust is facilitated through the process of communication. It is my belief that the vast majority of people entering the doors of our organizations want to commit their discretionary effort to and gain a sense of achievement from their worklife. They want to feel that they count, that they make a difference. All the organization has to do is not get in the way; not to do things that de-motivate the individual. At the individual level, an organization allows an employee's innate motivation to be actualized through establishing a climate of trust by communicating respect and concern for the individual, by maintaining openness through listening and answering candidly employee questions about what is really happening, by sharing regards, and by practicing fairness.

Staying within the realm of the macro level, I want to shift our focus from climate communications to mission communications. I had a football coach tell me many years back "It doesn't matter how bad you want to score a touchdown if you don't know the plays." I might add to that, "and if you are not playing as a member of a team." Getting employees involved is very similar to getting a football team ready to play a game. Half of the battle is facilitating a winning climate and the other half is getting each member working together as a unit, moving the ball down the field toward the goal line. The second half of this equation is mission communications. Mission communications create a sense of common mission and purpose, enabling each individual employee to make that particular contribution which moves the total organization toward successful achievement of its goals and ultimate mission. At Federal Express we see our internal corporate media fulfilling two primary roles for enlisting employee involvement in the company's mission: 1) facilitate sharing the company's vision with employees, and 2) facilitate goal congruency among all the company's operating units.

These two roles are difficult to separate when you observe our communication efforts. Our awareness of them, however, guides our communication planning efforts.

I strongly support the notion that a great organization is an organization with a clear vision of where it is going—a vision of the future and the part of that vision that belongs to the organization. The vision in most cases belongs to the person at the top of the organization. In our case the chairman and founder, Fredrick W. Smith, started Federal Express with a vision of what kind of transportation system would be needed as our country moved from an economy based on heavy industry to one based on a new age of information, where the major articles of commerce would shift from big to small, heavier to lighter, steel to silicon. He saw that a dramatic change of the American industrial scene was approaching, and that it would create a demand for a new transportation system. The speed and reliability of systems adequate for the old economy would not suffice for the new. A new market existed for a highly reliable overnite delivery system and a new invention was needed to provide such a service. The "better mouse trap" he built first took form in a college term paper. The paper got only a passing grade, but the idea stuck with Fred Smith, and it became the vision of what is now a company of 46,000 employees, over 700 locations, 119 aircraft, and annual revenues of \$2.6 billion.

Over the years the visionary leadership of our executive management team has been our primary communication resource. One of the most apparent places you can find our visionary communications is at our annual Family Briefings. Each year the company invites all employees and their families or guests to come and learn where the company has been over the past year and where it wants to go in the year ahead. At each of these events members of executive management, including Fred Smith, convey to the employees the company's values and vision of the future.

Organizations fortunate enough to have visionary leaders at the helm have a distinct advantage of building a highly committed and involved workforce. People strongly want to belong to something worthwhile, something that will make a difference, and the more they feel a part of the vision, the more involved they become in the effort to realize that vision. Organizational communicators must manage the vision-sharing process so that employees feel they are an integral part of something that is worthwhile. This identification adds a sense of purpose to their personal worklives.

Finally, at the macro level our internal media mobilizes the workforce to achieve the company's mission by facilitating goal congruence. The vision describes the destination of the company, and the strategic goals are the road map the company uses to get itself there.

Without this final piece of the equation an organization is like a football team, fired up and ready to win, led by

the vision of being a championship team but not knowing which direction to move the ball. Effectively involved employees participate in the overall planning to achieve organizational success, and they understand what the organization must do to complete its mission. Organizations become teams when all members direct their efforts toward the same goal.

Internal corporate media that facilitates workforce understanding of the organization's macro level goals is essential. Two examples from our files illustrate how we work toward this understanding.

As stated earlier, Federal Express is project oriented. New activities develop rapidly making it difficult to keep up with them all. We employees sometimes need a refresher course to answer the questions: what are all these efforts, how do they somehow connect, and is there some master plan tying them to the company's mission? To bring order to this situation we devised what we called the strategic grid (see Figure I). Across the top are our corporate objectives and down the left margin are our corporate strengths. We asked our managers throughout the company to confer with their employees and fill in the blocks with the company's current projects.

Sometimes major corporate goals change and we face the monumental challenge of communicating why a former goal is not as important as it used to be or, as illustrated in the following example, why a new goal is being added of equal importance to a current goal. Such was the case when we began to plan our communication strategy on a project called Cosmos IIB. The Cosmos IIB project puts a bar-code scanner, like those used by grocery store inventory clerks, into the hands of our employees directly involved in the movement of packages. As the package moves through our system it is scanned each step along the way, from pickup to the final delivery location. The retrieval data on each package's whereabouts is fed into our computer mainframe in Memphis. Our Customer Service Centers located all across the country access this data bank to provide customers with extremely accurate and timely information about their shipments. In developing our strategy we decided that our prime employee audience was the courier workforce, the 12,000 men and women who pick up and deliver our customers' shipments and interact face to face with customers daily.

We worked with our training department to achieve 100% data entry accuracy on every package passing through a courier's hands. Our role and the role of the training department for achieving this objective were divided along attitudinal and instructional lines. The training department would show them how to use the scanner and we would help them realize the value of the new technology, understand how their new job duties related to it, and how it effected the company's future success.

As we further analyzed our specific part of the strategy, we realized that we were really changing our couriers' traditional job role by asking them to share a new goal of equal importance to the single most important goal they had in the past. In the past, a courier knew that the most important goal was to get the package to the customer on time. We had built a culture of speed and reliability based on every courier's total involvement in meeting this goal.

With the introduction of CIIB the company was asking the courier to put as much importance on information tracking about a package as getting the package delivered on time. The couriers' primary goal had now become two-fold. We knew we had to launch a massive re-education process to establish the rationale for the company's decision to create the new goal.

For the couriers to be just as committed to and involved with the new goal as they were with the original goal meant they had to understand that the change in the company's overall strategy was based on a changing market place and on changing customer expectations. The new corporate strategy was called product differentiation. In the early years of Federal Express the goal of getting the package delivered expeditiously and reliably worked fine because that was all the market demanded. As the competition heated up things began to change. The distinction between Federal Express and those who emulated our methods was becoming less clear. Our commitment to superior service for the customer required that we offer what others could not offer—realtime shipment information in the market place. We knew that our first communication objective with the couriers was to help them understand the concept of product differentiation and why it was essential to the company's long term growth. Only then could they see the value of Cosmos IIB and accept the goal of gathering accurate and timely data on each package passing through their hands.

The result of our analysis and planning was a communication strategy based on the following objectives. We directed all of our macro media at 1) drawing employee attention to the new corporate goal of product differentiation. Based on employee understanding of this goal we would, 2) build the rationale for the importance of tracking shipment information for customers in order to distinguish us from our competitors, and 3) narrow our focus to each individual courier's new job goal to scan accurately and consistently each shipment. We decided that this final communication step needed to occur at the workgroup level. A manager and his/her people could interpret the company's overall product differentiation goal in terms of their local operation. This would allow the manager to be involved directly in building support for the new goal within the workgroup. We prepared our managers to lead an employee information processing seminar about the CIIB project at their locations. They received a kit to prepare them for that seminar. It included a meeting leader's guide, video tape, checklists, feedback log, questions and answers, and a communication schedule.

The Cosmos IIB communication program is currently in progress. Our feedback to date says that employees are committing to their new responsibility to gather accurate and timely shipment information. This happened because the macro level communication process helped them see the connection between Cosmos IIB and the company's

larger goal to differentiate Federal Express from its competitors.

We have looked at how an organization can use the potential of its macro media and programs to build trust between the employee and the organization through climate communication. We then examined how macro level mission communications channel employee commitment into employee involvement for organizational success by cultivating a shared vision, and by facilitating goal congruence.

To conclude I would like to issue a challenge to our profession. George Bernard Shaw said "The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been achieved." Over the years this quotation has stuck with me. It summarizes the challenge we face to help organizational leaders break through some of the antiquated perceptions they hold about communicating with employees. We must stop playing with communication as if it were an innocuous art form, or even worse, a clear disguise for manipulating employees to work harder. Such regressive notions severely obstruct the organization from ever realizing the true value that a sound communication philosophy can provide, and that is establishing a work environment of openness and trust, where people on the line have confidence to speak out and to get involved in matters pertaining to the organization's welfare, and where managers have no fear of listening and accepting employee input. Communication illusions are not prevalent in organizations with open, free flowing, authentic communications at all levels. There are fewer corners in which they can hide. The organizations that will excel in today's changing economic environment and that will assume the positions of future leadership in their respective markets will do so because they learned to get employees involved in creating the solutions to tomorrow's problems. That means developing an enlightened communication foundation based on openness, trust, and authentic concern for the individual employees.

Figure 1

STRATEGIC GRID

Name _____

Employee Number _____

		OBJECTIVES				
		1. Improve Service/Differentiate Product	2. Lower Price/Enhance Value	3. Expand Coverage/Get Closer To Customer	4. Use Electronic Systems To Do 1,2,&3	5. Improve Cash Flow/Manage Profit
STRENGTHS	1. Motivated Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Quarterly Pay Reviews -Quality Checks -Earlier Delivery Communication -Customer Satisfaction Communication -Pay for Performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Q-P Programs -Productivity Improvements -Split Shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Foot Couriers -BSC's -Earlier Delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Prisms -Handheld DADS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Improved Communication -Health Care Cost Containment -Q-P Programs -CPS Merit
	2. Aviation Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Magic Window -CAT IIIA -Super Mod Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -DC 10's 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Feeder Aircraft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Simulator -Aircraft Charters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Super Mod Program
	3. Electronics Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Zodiac Sorting -ZapMail: International and Domestic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Polaris -Overnight ZapMail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -DADS -Smart Drop Box -Customer Meters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -COSMOS IIB -Zap -DADS -Saturn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Automated Billing -Descriptive Billing -Ambassador Billing
	4. Size and Scope Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Space Program -Statewide Coverage -International 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -On-call Pickups -Hundredweight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -BSC -International -Kiosk -Metroplexes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Call Centers -Customer Meters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Greater Density -On-call Pickups -Bypass/Bleedoff -Metroplexes
	5. Marketing Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Money Back Guarantee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -ONE Improvements -Drop-off Discount -October Pricing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -BSC's -Local Promotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Customer Premises Meiers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -BSC's -Saturn

