

Journey Inward

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Communication is the totality of our consciousness and behaviour. A pot pourri of what we say, what we do, and who we are. It is values and attitudes in action. Developing communication competence is about facilitating the journey inward.

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A TIDAL WAVE of change is driving the issue of communication steadily up the management agenda to a point where even the most determined corporate ostrich must find it hard to ignore.

Time was when the value of a business was in its product or its plant and machinery. The people who came to work and went home at night were merely adjuncts to the process. Now that value has shifted significantly into the intellectual realm and business is discovering what the film and creative industries have always lived with: that at regular intervals such as nightfall, the assets put their hats and coats on, and go home! (Or cross the street for a better deal or a more appropriate or comfortable working atmosphere.)

The transformation is part of a wider movement. A global revolution that's changing the way people think and work, and forcing organisations of all shapes and sizes to change the way they do business if they are to survive.

But organisations don't change. *People* change. And that's why the spotlight is on communication and relationships. Internal, employee or organisational communication - whatever label you pin on it - is a 'hot' issue, yet in my experience organisations are struggling with the concept and are not at all sure how to deal with it.

Rather than any single cause, I believe there's a combination of factors at work. For a start, communication is still seen by many as a 'soft' issue that can easily be pushed aside. The vital link between communication and the bottom line is simply not recognised.

Then there's the truly blinkered approach: that communication is 'fine' here. *After all, we tell the staff what they want to know.* In the absence of any feedback mechanism it's a lucky organisation indeed that can say this with any certainty. And in today's volatile business landscape, if you take communication for granted, you're taking a risk.

But perhaps the most important factor is that there's a genuine lack of understanding of the part communication *behaviour* plays in making things the way they are. And that includes the things you don't want, as well as the things you do.

People at heart

The more evolved the organisation the more evolved communication tends to be, and here and there the cool winds of change are fanning a slow recognition not only of the tremendous benefits of managing employee communication in a strategic way, but of the urgent need to do so.

The source of the pressure is both internal and external. In the emerging business paradigm, people issues are top of the agenda because it is *people* who will keep the business fit and healthy

and responsive - not the organisation. What is the organisation anyway, if you take away the people? The great global rush to make everything look, feel, sound and taste the same, means it's getting harder for businesses to differentiate themselves by what they sell, so customer service, corporate values - what the company stands for - and the quality of the working experience, are some of the last frontiers where there's a chance to stand out from the crowd.

This new added value can *only* come from the hearts and minds of the people, not from some company policy document.

And *where* are the people? A growing number are not even *in* the organisation anymore, but working outside it in a variety of flexible arrangements and relationships - even spread across the globe in 'virtual' teams linked only by telephone and computer. Management's challenge lies not just in keeping people hooked up to each other, but more critically, aligned to the business and *its purpose*.

As knowledge moves ever closer to the heart of business, the hottest corporate resource for the next twenty years according to McKinsey, will be talent. Tagged the 'talent war' in the US as the best companies fight to attract - *and keep* - the best people, this tightening labour pool is already making itself felt in many HR departments in Ireland.

In the new-style workplace communication needs have changed radically. The 'job-for-life' is dead and gone and with it the psychological contract between employer and employee. The search for security at the heart of the job-for-life concept has become a search for meaning and purpose in life and work, and a longing for a different relationship with the workplace.

Beating at the heart of all these changes is a growing need for strong relationships, for teamwork, commitment, for flexibility, trust and cooperation, respect and dignity, and a sense of community. It's hardly surprising that survey after survey on both sides of the Atlantic continually rate

communication and relationship management among today's top management skills.

People *are* the business and if they are to deliver the new proposition, they need to be connected up to the business and to each other, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. All other things being equal, if people have no concrete reason to be loyal to the organisation, only an enhanced work experience will drive their commitment.

Rooted in the past

The radical change in employees' needs and attitudes is nothing short of a paradigm shift, yet the way people and organisations communicate has hardly moved on at all, because our understanding of it has not moved on.

A lot of what's done is rooted in the past: designed to gain compliance rather than foster commitment. To tell and sell, rather than nurture relationships. Most formal communication is still top-down and 'message' oriented. (In spite of all the talk of 'flatter' organisations, when it comes to communication, I'm afraid the hierarchy is alive and well!)

Organisations don't exist. They come into being moment by moment through the interaction of people - our communicative behaviour. Recognising this fundamental fact - that communication *is* the energy that drives the organisation - is a critical first step in evolving our understanding of how to cultivate a 'communicating company'.

Definitions confine or liberate our thinking, and the common definition of communication is a very narrow one. It's about technology, talking, speaking, writing. Or delivering messages. (Isn't that what couriers do?)

But it's hardly surprising. Few people ever study it formally or even discuss it except perhaps when it fails, and I doubt if many ever consciously consider it at all. We send our young people into the school system to prepare them for life and they come out the other end knowing all sorts of interesting things, but very little about what's going on inside their heads or their hearts. We've loaded all the

software, but we haven't explained the operating system!

Little wonder then that we end up in the adult world with at best a mediocre understanding of how we work, as human beings. At worst, no idea at all. And we carry this lack of understanding into our relationships, our workplaces, and into the wider society, with the all too familiar stressful results we see every day.

Tinkering at the edges

The current menu of communication training and development activities seems to reflect this narrow understanding, focusing as it does on techniques and skills to be bolted onto the outside: report writing, telephone "techniques", presentation "skills", negotiation "skills" - the output of *verbal* communication.

But we know that words account for only 10% of what we communicate - indeed, some of the most eloquent and compelling communication of all, is silence. So current training, it seems to me, only tinkers around the edges of a far more profound competence that is the very essence of personal and business success in a new world.

It's time to move on. The emerging paradigm calls for a deeper and more complete understanding, and a working model that embraces the full spectrum of communication.

The One Hundred Percent

Communication is the totality of our consciousness and behaviour. A pot pourri of what we say, what we do and who we are. It is values and attitudes in action. And it's not an option - something we prepare for and 'do' now and then - but something we are all part of all of the time.

In short, our communicative behaviour is the creator of our moment to moment reality. It defines the quality of our experience, of work and of the company. And that affects the choice and quality of what we produce, the service we provide, and the

values we transmit through our organisations, to the wider community.

Communication is therefore the single most important factor in building a new reality, or maintaining the status quo.

A new spirit at work

Nurturing the relationships - the context in which business happens - is perhaps the most important task facing everyone in the workplace today. And potentially, the most rewarding.

At the highest levels in organisations around the world the sustainability of the current business model is being questioned. The vigorous growth of "socially responsible" investment companies (SRIs) is but one of many clear signs that the social context in which business is allowed to operate, is changing too.

Companies in the vanguard of global change are learning that the only real way to build competitive advantage, is through their human capital. To develop the organisation by developing its people.

A new way of being cannot be 'engineered' or hammered into existence. It is vested in attitudes and behaviour so it can only be reached through hearts and minds, by helping individuals to cultivate a new communication wisdom that will seed a new kind of organisation. In short, a new spirit at work.

The first step on the road to better communication is self-awareness - raising to consciousness some of the unconscious processes that drive our attitudes and behaviour and make us what we are. Developing real communication competence therefore is about facilitating the journey inward. A shift in the emphasis of current communication training. From outside-in, to inside-out.

So the task of creating a more communicationally aware organisation has to start with developing the communication competence of the individual, at the level of consciousness and awareness - *not only technique*.

Individual consciousness and behaviour defines organisational consciousness and behaviour. And organisational behaviour is the dominant value system in our society. In that light, the journey inward we make as individuals and as organisations, may be the most important road we can travel. For ourselves, for the people we serve, and ultimately for the world we live in. ||| **dya**

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About the author

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He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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