

STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN

Will we ever learn? Only in May in this column I bemoaned how poor communication was contributing to the discord that triggered what promised to be this country's biggest rail disruption in a decade. A union leader maintained employers had changed pension arrangements 'without a word of negotiation'.

Rail bosses may have considered they had discussed pension arrangements with the workforce, but the union didn't think so. There may have been communication, but it certainly wasn't dialogue.

Communication has never been so high on the business agenda, yet companies who should know better are failing at this most basic of management skills. Even global operations such as British Airways and Ford are culprits; having recently chosen to eschew dialogue in favour of autocratic decisions.

Earlier this year BA check-in staff walked out over sudden changes in working conditions – that disruption left some 100,000 travellers stranded and cost BA a reported £40 million. Only a few months later the same workforce threatened another walk out. They decided that after six-months of fruitless pay 'talks', action would speak louder than words.

In September, Ford employees at the Jaguar factory in Coventry found out about the threatened closure of the plant from media reporters outside the factory gates. Cameras caught stunned looks on the faces of workers who had heard nothing from their bosses. Ford said it was considering all possible options. Two days later the company announced it would end production at the Coventry plant and shed more than 1,000 jobs across Jaguar.

Not only was Ford not talking to its employees about their livelihood, it wasn't talking with them to define how such radical changes could be sensitively handled.



Too many companies seem to think communication is a one-way street. **Lyn Bicker** urges managers to talk a little less and listen a little more

communication would seem to have helped resolve a delicate situation, I perceive a one-sided conversation at best. Siemens has persuaded telephone plant employees to work 40 hours a week, instead of 35, without extra pay. How? The company promised not to shift production and 2,000 jobs to Hungary. Volkswagen is following this shining example. In pursuit of a two year pay freeze, it is said to want workers in its German factories to put in longer hours in return for keeping production there. These bosses aren't talking, they're shouting.

Unchallenged assumptions are the bane of communications. Companies that fail at even basic communication tend to make three assumptions: that an internal communications strategy will deliver an exchange of views, that an audience automatically hears what is being said and that the company listens to what its audience is saying.

Need to tell your workforce or team about the state of the nation? Your internal communications strategy will have identified an array of mechanisms to inform and involve your workforce. Take your pick: the immediacy and flexibility of electronic communications – e-mail, web conferencing, corporate

broadcasting, intranets – and the traditional annual meetings, team briefings and face-to-face sessions. This myriad of tools helps us establish, maintain and develop contact with people.

But just because your message is out there doesn't mean it's being heard the way you meant it. Nor does rank silence mean the news has been warmly welcomed.

There's plenty of corporate communication going on out there – but it's overwhelmingly one way. And the consequences can be swift and costly. As a specialist in organisational development, over the years clients have proudly waved their communications strategies at me, saying: 'We talk with our people all the time. They know what we need to thrive, we know what they desire'.

One customer had already suffered the fallout from a communications initiative that set out the company's future goals. It assumed staff would be incentivised by sharing the fruits of success. But staff did not trust the glib language or the abrasive leadership style of their senior executives. Muted scepticism soured moves to boost efficiency. The attempt to change gear stalled.

This is a good example of why communications is vital to achieving a strong sense of one team and one common purpose. Naïve mistakes and sweeping assumptions can be expensive. It may sound trite, but I maintain the one skill critical to a successful communications investment is the ability to listen. This is not as simple as it sounds. Proper, successful listening requires an open mind, a willingness to see things from another's perspective, acknowledgement that what you are saying is not necessarily more important than what your workforce is thinking, and, above all, a genuine desire to hear what somebody else thinks of how you are doing. ■



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