Frontline supervisors—not senior managers—are the opinion leaders in your organization.

Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees

by T.J. Larkin and Sandar Larkin

Most advice given to executives about communicating change is wrong. The advice usually boils down to more: more values, missions, and vision; more videos, publications, and meetings; more executive road shows. This communication is not working. Why would anyone want more of it?

More of what executives already do will not solve their communication problems. Practical experience and decades of research suggest a new approach. In 1993, Wyatt Company (now Watson Wyatt Worldwide) investigated 531 U.S. organizations undergoing major restructuring. Wyatt asked the CEOs, If you could go back and change one thing, what would it be? The most frequent answer: The way I communicated with my employees. The next time you communicate major change to your frontline employees, do it differently. Communicate only facts; stop communicating values. Communicate face-to-face, do not rely on videos, publications, or large meetings. And target frontline supervisors, do not let executives introduce the change to frontline employees.

Before going any further, let’s clarify two points. First, our advice concerns the communication of the sort of change that most companies face every five to ten years. We are talking about change that

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is necessary because the company's survival may be at stake, not about everyday operational changes. Second, our advice is about reaching and changing frontline employees in large companies. Frontline employees such as bank tellers, truck drivers, processors of insurance forms, airline counter staff, welders, and telephone installers are the people making the product or delivering the service. If you want these people to change the way they do their jobs, then you must change the way you communicate with them.

Stop Communicating Values

The urge to wrap a change in a value is irresistible. But the urge to communicate your values is proof positive that you are not acting on them. The only effective way to communicate a value is to act in accordance with it and give others the incentive to do the same. If you value customer service, for instance, then recruitment, performance appraisals, promotions, and bonuses should be based on customer service performance. Creating objective measures for such performance will demonstrate your values much more clearly than your words ever can.

Stopping the value talk itself is a radical change, especially considering that, according to the Wyatt study, 68% of large companies consider missions and values to be their number one communication priority. We appeal to your intuition and common sense. Imagine meeting a business contact for the first time. This person hands you a card and says, "I want you to know my values. They are written here: I promise not to lie, cheat, or steal during any business transaction." Does that put you at ease? No—it makes you suspicious, and it does so because people reveal their values through their actions, not through their words. Talking about values signals that fraud is near.

What is true for people is true for organizations. In 1992, the Jensen Group, a change-management communication firm in Morristown, New Jersey, researched 23 large U.S. companies, including American Express, AT&T, Chemical Bank, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Mobil, Texaco, and Warner-Lambert. Seventy percent of the companies had revised their corporate missions during recent restructuring; only 9% felt that revising their missions helped them achieve the objectives of the restructuring.

If you break the rule that values are best communicated through actions, employees will punish you. We have watched employees turn the slogans Quality in Everything We Make into Quality Is Everything We Fake, Beliefs We Share into [Expletive] We Share, and Working with Pride into Working for [Expletive]. You might ask, Should we abandon our mission campaign just because of smart-aleck remarks from a handful of cynics? The question denies the reality. The frontline workforce is not sprinkled with a handful of cynics; it is cynical through and through. According to a study by Philip Mirvis and Donald Kanter published in the autumn 1989 issue of the National Productivity Review, 43% of employees believe that management cheats and lies. In their research, Mirvis and Kanter found that the frontline workforce is the most cynical group of all.

The latest wave of downsizings has made this bad situation worse. A 1994 study by the Council of Communication Management shows that 64% of employees believe that management is often lying. As reported in the Wall Street Journal (November 2, 1992), two-thirds of senior personnel managers surveyed by Right Associates, a human-resources consulting firm based in Philadelphia, said that employees trust management less after a restructuring. Face it: Employees will infer what you value from your behavior. They will adopt your values only if they are convinced that those values will enable them to attain their personal goals. Propaganda won't help.

In fact, it could hurt. At a large manufacturing company undergoing major change, thousands of employees watched as senior managers unveiled a new mission. Thousands more witnessed the unveiling by satellite. The slogan Trust, Teamwork, and Tomorrow was on a huge banner behind the speaker's platform. As employees left the presentation, they received pens, caps, and coffee mugs inscribed with the three Ts. When they returned to work, however, they found a letter to employees from the union posted on every bulletin board. This well-documented letter accused the company of hiring private investigators to watch employees suspected of
stealing, using drugs, and making fraudulent disability claims. Investigators watched employees both during and after work, the letter claimed, and watched some employees even during the Trust, Teamwork, and Tomorrow launch.

Executives scrambled to rescue the new mission. Public relations consultants were called in to explain to employees that hiring private investigators to watch them does not necessarily imply a lack of trust. The tragedy in the Trust, Teamwork, and Tomorrow example is not the embarrassment the executives felt but the damage done to the worthwhile changes wrapped in the value campaign. The changes themselves were acceptable to most employees. The empty words were not.

The solution is to communicate the facts—only the facts. Members of senior-management change teams must articulate in the fewest words possible what they plan to do. They must set those facts down on paper. This brief summary will become a change booklet that will guide face-to-face communication between senior managers and supervisors, and between supervisors and front-line employees.

The change booklets shown in the exhibit. “Change Booklets: No Slogans, No Threats, No Pep Talks” were given to front-line supervisors by senior managers in face-to-face briefings. Both examples come from companies with which we have worked. The first change booklet was used by a bank that was closing regional business banking centers and moving its larger customers from neighborhood branches to the regional centers. The second example is from a manufacturing company that was preparing to lay off more than 2,000 employees. These booklets are barely readable, but they are not meant to be read. They are meant to be explained and discussed. Notice what these examples do not have: punctuation, sentences, slogans, threats, pep talks. They contain nothing but facts.

Not communicating to employees during major organizational change is the worst mistake a company can make. Consider the conclusions from three important studies on communication during mergers and acquisitions: In periods of high stress and uncertainty, people fill communication voids with rumors; rumors end up attributing the worst possible motives to those in control; and communication lowers employees’ stress and anxiety even when the news is bad. In other words, uncertainty is more painful than bad news.

But, you might say, our change is too complicated to communicate in a matter-of-fact style. Then simplify the change. In large organizations, the limits of what you can communicate as facts are also the limits of what you can do. The prescriptions are simple: Cut out every unnecessary word. Avoid mission statements and management proclamations. Tell employees, straight up, exactly what you plan to do.

Communicate Face-to-Face

The best way to communicate a major change to the frontline workforce is face-to-face. Do not use videos or video hookups, do not introduce the change in a company publication, and do not hold large meetings with frontline employees.

Videos. Over the past 15 years, video has been the fastest-growing medium for communicating with employees. This growth defies the fact that employees don’t really want to watch videos. In the United States, video ranks eleventh out of 14 communication methods, according to studies conducted jointly by the International Association of Business Communicators and Towers Perrin, Forster & Crosby (now Towers Perrin) in 1980, 1982, and 1984, and by TPF&C in 1990. According to a 1989 survey by the Industrial Society, a London-based training organization, British employees rated video thirteenth out of 16 ways to receive information. Sixty percent of large British companies have used videos to communicate major change, according to a 1993 study by the Institute of Management, a British trade association, yet 75% of those companies believe that the videos are ineffective. Our own survey of communication studies from the past 20 years suggests that across Canada, Australia, the United States, and Great Britain, employees prefer face-to-face communication to video at a rate of two to one.

Skip the research, use your intuition. A U.S. pizza chain needs to communicate a major change to employees and chooses to do so by distributing a video. What will happen? Will the teenage pizza cooks don their hats and hair nets, pull up chairs within inches of the TV, fold their hands, and watch the executive with utter seriousness? Or will they laugh, mimic the talking head, crack jokes, and throw bits of pepperoni at the screen? We suggest that the only place where the first scene actually occurs is in the minds of senior executives and that the image was probably planted there by communication consultants.

A threat to genuine communication even greater than the videocassette is on the horizon: digital video compression. This new technology reduces the cost of a satellite video channel from about $150,000 per month to only $15,000 per month. The enhanced quality of the image and the lowered cost will enable corporate executives to transmit
their speeches live and then take questions through two-way hookups. The danger of this technology is that senior executives will use it. In front of the bright lights and rolling cameras, executives will reach into their bag of slogans and pull out the fluff: "delighting our customers," "becoming the best in the world," "working together as a family." They will then open the floor to an unhearsay, unscripted flow of questions from the front line. In this situation, expect questions and comments to fall into three categories.

- The ridiculously specific question: "Our supplier packages salt in 40-pound sacks. That's too heavy.

Can you possibly do something about that?"

- The goody-two-shoes comment: "Sounds like one heck of a challenge, but you can count on me." This remark appears innocent, but it isn't. The communication department will spend the next two weeks trying to convince everyone that it was not a setup.

- The I-hate-management diatribe: This is a short speech delivered by a particularly bitter employee whose anger is surpassed only by his or her rhetor-
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tical skill. The speech goes something like this: "People used to be proud to work for this company. But no longer. We gave you our trust and you shafted us. Everyone knows that morale in this place is in the dirt. All this company does is use people and then throw them away. How can you look at yourself in the mirror? After the way you have treated people, you should be ashamed." Meanwhile, 99% of the employees in the company lower their heads and mumble, "What a disaster." And the disaster they're referring to is not the hateful diatribe but the fact that management gave the floor to such an extreme individual.

Even before the first management platitudeme, even before the irrelevant, incredulous, or incendiary comments from employees, a terrible mistake has been made. A video presentation necessarily requires an audience. That is its inescapable flaw. When frontline employees are anticipating a major change, when they are becoming increasingly tense and worried, when their blood is beginning to run hot, the last thing you should do is gather them into a large group. In his 1896 book, The Crowd, French sociologist Gustave Le Bon described the "intensification of the emotions" and the "inhibition of the intellect," when individuals form a crowd. Think about that the next time you are practicing in front of the TelePrompter before the big announcement.

Publications. Unlike a video, the company publication does not require the formation of a crowd. But it still has two major flaws in the eyes of frontline employees: It is untrustworthy and usually incomprehensible.

In the midst of major change in the early 1990s, Whirlpool asked its employees to evaluate the company publication, Vision. As reported in an article by Peter Moore in the March 1994 issue of Communication World, only 20% thought that the publication was "valuable and believable." The Whirlpool employees were probably being generous. A 1992 study by Mercer Management Consulting of 200 employee communication managers showed that 70% referred to their publications as "attempts at the truth," and less than 15% said that the publications reflected the entire truth.

The corporate publication process guarantees that a proposed organizational change will be neither believed nor understood. Think about it: An editor interviews the relevant managers and writes a story about the change. The story is then circulated to a dozen or so senior executives for comment. Each executive calls the editor and makes some vague suggestions for improving the piece. When the editor begins the final version, the audience is no longer the frontline workforce but the senior executives, each of whom will look for evidence of his or her influence in the final piece. The end product is an incredibly skillful, elaborately woven compromise—innocuous and unintelligible.

Many companies put up additional barriers to effective print communication. As Stephen Anderson reports in an article in the April 1994 issue of Communication World, GM/Saturn requires that all publications for employees be produced jointly by GM/Saturn management and the United Auto Workers. Another layer of overseers, interpreters, and censors is added, and more people in power must be appeased.

Think about what GM/Saturn has done, especially in light of GM's own research showing that only 8% of its employees prefer the union to the company itself as a source of information. This mistrust of unions is not limited to the UAW. According to Dennis Taylor's research on heavily unionized Australian companies published by the Australian Government Publishing Service in 1982, only 45% of employees believed that their union was usually or always telling the truth, whereas 96% said that their supervisors were usually or always telling the truth. GM/Saturn is undoubtedly trying to improve communication, but is only adding another entity to be distrusted.

Again, use your common sense. On a day when your company's newspaper is delivered, visit the front line. Do employees dash into the supervisor's office, tear off the binding string, and hastily turn pages searching for articles on an upcoming change? No. These people are not fools. They know that the information in every article has been screened, qualified, pruned, softened, toned down, and hyped up.

Videos and publications can be useful tools, but not for introducing major change to frontline employees. Videos, for example, can convey technical information that is immediately applicable. Federal Express broadcasts videos on the best techniques
Many managers think that huge meetings will do the trick. They are wrong.

for wrapping and shipping fragile packages. The U.S. Postal Service makes videos that show counter staff how to figure prices when rates change. Videos are also useful when employees demand information that is not immediately relevant to them. For example, after the disastrous chemical leak in Bhopal, India, Union Carbide employees all over the world wanted to know how the tragedy happened and what the company was doing about it. Union Carbide's communication department went from making 4 videos per year to making 45. Such videos make good sense.

Similarly, publications can be valuable. At their best, publications can guide informal face-to-face discussions. That is what the change booklets described earlier are meant to do. But print alone is not enough. When a change requires frontline employees to do their jobs differently, that information must be delivered face-to-face, first in discussions between senior managers associated with the change and frontline supervisors, and then in discussions between the supervisors and their frontline subordinates.

Meetings. Many managers realize that communication should be face-to-face but think that huge meetings will do the trick. This is wrong. Face-to-face communication does not and should not mean large meetings when one has to communicate with frontline employees.

Stop for a moment. Let's ask the experts the best way to communicate with frontline employees. Who are the experts? Not big-name consultants. The experts are the frontline supervisors, the people who communicate with frontline employees daily. Researchers rarely ask those supervisors how they like to communicate. One of the few with the wisdom to do so is Janice A. Klein. Her study "Why Supervisors Resist Employee Involvement" [HBR September-October 1984] shows that 85% of supervisors avoid meetings and prefer one-on-one communication.

Why? Supervisors know that any meeting with shop-floor workers can degenerate into a grievance session. Supervisors find that, as individuals, workers are reasonable and cooperative. In groups, however, a different mind-set prevails. What supervisor believes that it is a good idea to ask shop-floor employees to rally publicly behind a management initiative? Supervisors know that any employee who stands up in support of corporate-led changes will be branded a company stooge.

Communication professionals are wedded to the big bang theory of communication. "Of course there was communication," they say. "Weren't you at the Big Event?" In the belief that big events will generate excitement and demonstrate an organization's commitment, the professional communicators busy themselves in preparation. They arrange meeting times, reserve rooms, schedule temps to cover for employees at the meeting, prepare stacks of overhead transparencies, and book supervisors into the inevitable training course in communication skills.

The CEO of a large U.S. company enjoys telling this story: Her driver, cheerful as ever, picks her up at home and drives her to the office. Along the way,
the CEO silently confronts her fear that layoffs may become necessary. Arriving at the office, she calls a meeting of the senior team and expresses her worry behind closed doors. Without better performance, she tells them, the company may have to lay people off. She leaves the meeting, takes the elevator to the basement garage, and steps into her car. The driver, with tears in his eyes, turns and asks, "How long have I got?"

The story exaggerates only slightly the astonishing speed with which rumors spread in large companies. But how? Who schedules the rumor meetings? Without temps and overtime, how do employees find time to pass on the rumor? Who prints the rumors onto overhead transparencies? And where are the trainers providing supervisors with refresher courses in rumor-communication skills?

The truth is there, but we refuse to see it. Corporate videos, publications, and meetings don't move information through companies; they inhibit it. The most effective way to communicate is informally, face-to-face, one-on-one. The problem with rumors is their inaccuracy. That's why face-to-face communication must be grounded in fact and in print. But understand this about rumors: The transmission method is perfect.

Target Frontline Supervisors

The first words employees hear about any change usually come from a corporate source: a senior manager, company newspaper, or video. Considering the front line's overwhelming mistrust of and hostility toward the corporate center, that practice is strange. No matter what the change—merger, restructurings, downsizing, reengineering, the introduction of new technology, or a customer service campaign—the first words frontline employees hear about a change should come from the person to whom they are closest: their supervisor.

Perhaps the employees in your company do not have negative feelings about senior managers. Having doubts? Try asking. In the midst of major changes during the early 1990s, many companies asked their employees what they thought of senior management. Employees at Colgate-Palmolive described their senior management team as lacking leadership, having no direction, not working well together, and being out of touch with customers. Royal Bank of Scotland employees said that senior managers were authoritarian and failed to treat staff well, demanded more than they gave, and refused to listen. British Telecom employees said that they had little confidence in senior management and that the latest changes were bad for themselves personally, bad for BT employees in general, and bad for BT as a company. Employees at Whirlpool simply said, We didn't trust you before and we don't trust you now. The relationship between Rank Xerox senior managers and employees was described as disastrous.9

Those companies need not feel embarrassed. The trend of increasingly negative feelings toward senior management transcends any individual company or country. The companies mentioned above have simply been brave enough to talk about it. The people who should feel embarrassed are the communication consultants who continue to recommend launching change from the top despite such findings. As the time for announcing a major change comes closer, consultants line up outside the offices of senior managers and spout the same advice: "You've got to be more visible"; "You've got to be seen as driving this change"; "Employees need to know you've not fled to the bunker." This strategy may help senior managers engage middle managers, but it won't help them win over the front line. In fact, visibly associating senior executives with the change often increases resistance among frontline employees.

Employees have been telling us for years that they would rather receive information from their immediate supervisors than from senior managers. We've simply refused to listen. The studies conducted jointly by the International Association of Business Communicators and Towers, Perrin, Forster & Crosby in 1980, 1982, and 1984, and by TPP&C in 1990 all reached the same conclusion: U.S. and Canadian employees prefer their immediate supervisors as sources of information. The Industrial Society found that British employees have the same preference. According to a 1993 study by International Survey Research, an organization based in Chicago that conducts employee-opinion surveys, the supervisor is the preferred information source for workers throughout Europe. Research
that companies have conducted internally over the last two decades shows the same result: Ameritech, AT&T, Cadbury Schweppes, Exxon Chemical, GE, General Tire, GM, Hewlett-Packard, and Santa Fe all found that the immediate supervisor is the preferred source of information. Rarely does research speak in such a consistent voice. How should you respond to these findings? Spend 80% of your communication time, money, and effort on supervisors.

Research respected since the 1940s suggests that frontline supervisors are critical to the success of any change effort.

That is a radical recommendation. The traditional approach is to launch change from the top and hope that communication about the change will open like a parachute, blanketing everyone evenly. But frontline supervisors—not senior managers—are the opinion leaders in your organization. Because frontline supervisors greatly influence the attitudes and behaviors of others, they are critical to the success of any change effort. That realization, radical to communication consultants, is founded in communication research respected since the 1940s. At that time, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet wrote *The People's Choice*, in which they identified the crucial role of opinion leaders in changing behavior. Again, we've refused to listen.

Supervisor briefings are an effective way to gain the acceptance of supervisors. Supervisor briefings are face-to-face meetings between a senior manager working on the change and a small group of frontline supervisors. These briefings usually occur in two rounds. In the first round, the senior manager explains the change and supervisors make recommendations. (See the table "Ask Supervisors for Their Opinions." After this round, the senior manager reports the recommendations to the senior-management change team, and the group tries to work as many of the recommendations as possible into the plan. Remember, the degree to which supervisors will support your change depends on how many of their recommendations are used. This is the right time for compromise.

In the second round of briefings, the senior manager reports on the status of the recommendations and explains the final plan. (See the table "Give Them the Facts, Just the Facts.") Allow about two weeks to pass after the second round of briefings, and then release stories in the company's newspaper and in informational sheets.

Supervisor briefings may not sound revolutionary, but they are. In a company that institutes such briefings, a frontline employee who wants to know what's happening has only one way to get that information: by asking the supervisor. And that information probably will be communicated one-on-one and will be in the supervisor's own words. No big meeting, no grand announcement, no executive road shows, no speeches relayed by satellite. All the resources previously
spent communicating indiscriminately are aimed at communicating with supervisors, who are given information, influence, and thereby increased power and status. As a result, they are more likely to help implement change.

Max, the Supervisor

Max is a supervisor in an integrated steel mill. The personnel department says that Max has the worst employees in the company. How do they know this? They give him the worst employees. Max’s department also has the least downtime, the fewest discipline problems, the lowest rate of absenteeism, and the best safety record in the company.

Max’s reputation is formidable. According to one account, maintenance workers were under tremendous pressure to repair a continuous-casting machine. Unfortunately, Max was away on vacation. At 2 a.m., the workers finally tracked him down in a tavern hundreds of miles away. Mechanics held the telephone to the ailing machine while Max listened for several minutes without speaking. Max then directed an hour’s worth of instructions over the phone—and the machine ran perfectly.

Max’s company is undergoing major change, technically and culturally. One afternoon, the mill is stopped. Four hundred frontline workers gather in the cafeteria. Under a banner that reads Steel: Our Future, senior managers announce new capital investments in pulverized-coal injection, experiments with thin-slab casting, and an electric-arc furnace. Senior managers then describe the cultural changes.

Max, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with his crew, hears for the first time that the company will no longer have supervisors. Supervisors will become TFS [team facilitators]. Max’s maintenance department will become a CAT [committee action team]. Every frontline employee will be empowered to submit QIOs [quality improvement opportunities]. Max is told that he will be helped with the cultural transition: Professors from the university will run courses to help him “evolve” from a “boss” into a “facilitator of his CAT’s QIOs.”

Could this possibly be the best way to communicate these important changes to Max? Is it any wonder that he has doubts about the competence of the company’s senior managers? But don’t blame them, they’re experts in steel. Blame their communication advisers. While the launch of Steel: Our Future is embarrassing, it is not a tragedy. The tragedy has yet to occur.

In the days following the presentation, frontline workers make their way to Max’s shabby office. Sticking their heads in, they ask, “What do you think?” This is the moment that matters. What happens in Max’s office will determine how long it will take to make a return on this massive investment in new equipment. Following the presentation, the communication consultants pack their bags and go home. They think the communication is over. Little do they know that the real communication has not even begun.

So what will Max say? He has no inside information. He knows no more than any frontline employee. Max’s opinions seem to carry absolutely no weight. Instead of treating him as someone important, management rounded him up with his subordinates and dumped a bucket of jargon on him. The only words specifically targeted to supervisors

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What to Do | Why
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The same manager meets with the same supervisors. | Supervisors don’t want to deal with an obstruction—management; they want to deal with a person.

Bring a single piece of paper [copies for everyone] listing the supervisors’ recommendations. Next to each one, explain briefly why it was accepted or rejected. | You are not trying to convince the supervisors; you are there to let them know what has happened to their recommendations.

Answer questions but do not argue or excessively defend. | |

Distribute a change booklet to each supervisor. | |

Describe the major parts of the change as detailed in the change booklet. | |
Max was the kind of supervisor who could lead his team to fix a machine by listening to it over the phone.

were a threat: "There will be no place in the company for supervisors who fail to make the transition to team facilitators." What is Max going to say about the change? He's going to say, "It's [expletive]." That is the tragedy.

The Steel: Our Future campaign ignores its major challenge: getting frontline support for the new technology. The front line has every reason to withhold its cooperation. In fact, the front line has 800 reasons: the number of jobs eliminated from Max's division as a result of previous capital investments. Workers believe that slowing down the implementation may postpone further job losses. Slowing it down months would be good; slowing it down years would be even better.

During the presentation, the CEO said that the technology was not intended to replace workers. But the workers need to hear that Max believes that the new technology is not intended to replace jobs. And that will happen only if managers convince Max and his fellow supervisors.

Let's not overstate the damage caused by poor communication. Max's company will end up implementing its changes. The front line will eventually see that job reductions are not the goal. And the organization will deliver better steel more quickly to its customers. The problem, however, is that the changes will take longer than they need to. In their article "Why Some Factories Are More Productive than Others" [HBR September-October 1986], Robert H. Hayes and Kim B. Clark describe factories in which as much as two-thirds of the productivity gain from new equipment occurred as a result of employee learning. Employees experiment with and, modify new equipment and connecting equipment. Failure to gain acceptance for new technology, according to Hayes and Clark, can postpone return-on-investment goals by as much as a year. Max's crew will be eager to learn about the new technology if Max endorses it. And Max is more likely to do so if the company treats him as a vital source of information and as an opinion leader.

Our advice contradicts the widely publicized image of the charismatic executive rousing the troops through impassioned speeches, but it makes a lot of sense to workers on the front line of any organization. Senior managers must realize that employees will change the way they go about their jobs only if they learn about what is expected of them from a familiar and credible source. Communication between frontline supervisors and employees counts the most toward changed behavior where it matters the most: at the front line.


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