How’s Your Organization’s Blood Pressure?

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What is it? It’s hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, and it affects millions of people throughout the world. Unfortunately, many don’t know they are suffering from it because high blood pressure has no symptoms. You don’t feel any differently until it’s too late and you have a cardiac event.

In many ways, poor organizational communication is very much like hypertension. Often, you don’t recognize that your organization is suffering from poor communication because there are no symptoms, only catastrophic events: Top performing employees leave the company, key client relationships are jeopardized, important deadlines slip, and market share declines. What you don’t see or hear is the lack of focus on the company’s stated mission, the confusion about priorities, the alienation from lack of involvement in decisions, and the tenuous nature of employee engagement. But this doesn’t need to be so. In fact, a recent study conducted by Watson Wyatt Worldwide determined that companies that significantly improved employee communication increased their market values by 15%.

The link between organizational communication and shareholder value is often overlooked due mostly to the complex nature of communication and the discipline required to track how one affects the other. However, this is not a justifiable oversight on the part of senior executives, not when the rewards for improving organizational communication can yield double-digit increases in shareholder value. A few simple but concrete actions can make the link clearer, keeping it from being lost in obscurity.

You can reduce the risk of organizational hypertension and improve your company’s performance by improving your line of site into your firm’s communication. Organizational communication can be simply defined as the interactions required to direct a group toward a goal. Given the number of interactions needed to generate revenue, you might think that you are in the manufacturing or banking or retail business; but, in fact, that is only a part of what you do. Much of your time and your employees’ time is devoted to communicating. So it follows that improving communication will improve your ability to achieve goals. Of course, that means hundreds of thousands of interactions each day. The following are the predominant categories of organizational communication:

- Executive communication.
- Managerial communication.
- Team communication.
- Customer communication.

Executive Communication
An organization’s executives are tasked with developing and communicating the company’s vision and direction to many important people. Leaders of successful organizations are able to align employee behavior with their company’s mission and values. They are also able to articulate that mission to external stakeholders. To ensure success, leaders must have a communication blueprint.
Managerial Communication
Like executives, managers must also be skilled communicators. The manager’s function is essentially a combination of specific communication events that include translating strategy into actionable tasks, coaching, motivating, and managing employee performance. The fundamental skill at play in each of these managerial functions is interpersonal communication – a personal encounter that is more interactive in nature.

Team Communication
In the modern organization, teams and self-directed work groups make up a significant amount of the workforce. As a result, team communication cannot be downplayed. The success of these teams depends on the communication abilities of its members. Effective team communication helps reduce conflict, accelerates decisions, and drives productivity.

Customer Communication
Finally, and ultimately, since the customer is the foundation of any business, customer communication is the most critical skill in the employee-customer relationship. Your employees must be able to articulate value propositions, deliver customer care, and respond to customer problems with confidence and conscientiousness. Without effective communication skills, customers will be lost, and your business will die.

Diagnosis and Treatment
Diagnosing and treating organizational communication issues requires insight and commitment. The problem that organizational leaders face is that like high blood pressure, communication dysfunction is often asymptomatic. High blood pressure is often referred to as the silent killer for that very reason: no readily observable symptoms exist, only catastrophic outcomes if left undiagnosed and untreated.

Poor organizational communication is just like high blood pressure. It has no real symptoms. Instead it has only the resultant problems: the inability to get things done, tension between work groups and departments, and most unfortunate of all, unhappy customers.

How does poor communication creep into an organization? We know that high blood pressure is caused, at least in part, by poor diet, stress, and lack of exercise. Poor organizational communication is usually the result of uncertainty about the organization’s strategy, little or no communication planning, and poor communication skills at the individual level.

So what can executives do? Just like treating high blood pressure, the first step is diagnosis. A thorough exam will tell you if you have high blood pressure, and it may uncover the underlying causes. Organizations need similar diagnostics. A communication audit can help you understand if and where problems may be lurking. And just as in addressing high blood pressure, treatment or preventative measures can reduce the associated risks. If an audit uncovers a lack of clarity about the organization’s mission, it needs to be addressed immediately. Communication skills training and the addition of simple communication templates, such as meeting agendas, negotiation preparation worksheets, and coaching guides, can help improve one-on-one and team interactions. Communication is the heart that powers organizational performance. Be sure yours is functioning well.

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