

Human beings are the world's worst communicators

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

22 Aug 2019

I know I have said this before, but just about every time I hear some CEO or other talking on radio, I cringe at their pathetically patronising manners. Contrary to popular belief, mostly by MDs and CEOs, the vast majority of people who think they know how to communicate, actually haven't a clue.

Ironic, isn't it? That the very thing so fundamental to business is something that human beings are so singularly useless at. Communication. More specifically, inter-personal communication.

As I have said before, ad nauseam, of all living organisms, homo sapiens comes stone last. Even bacteria communicate better.

Think I'm exaggerating? Well, how often does a colleague passed his cold on to you just by being in the same office. And equally, how often did he cock up that telephone message he took for you?

If you're still not convinced about how bad we are at the art of communication try the good old broken telephone test. Get a dozen or so people to sit round a table and write down on a piece of paper a simple message. Something like: "Better late than never." Now whisper this simple little phrase into the ear of the person next to you. He in turn whispers it into the ear of the person next to him and so on. Each person is allowed only one chance to hear and then transmit the message.

Never ever has the original message gone round the table and stayed intact. By the time "Better late than never" is halfway round the table it will be something like: "Jake White is a mother...."

It is without doubt one of the most depressing tests of human intellect.

So, how does one handle internal communications in business? Certainly the most popular system of "cascading" doesn't work. This is where, for example, a message that needs to go out from a board meeting to an entire organisation is passed on from the various directors to their senior managers who pass it on to middle managers, who pass it on to their underlings who eventually pass it on to supervisors and ultimately the workers.

Sometimes it actually works - usually only when it is in the personal interests of the person passing on the message. Otherwise it hasn't a hope in Hades. And even when it does work it takes ages - anything up to three months a more to filter through an organisation of a few thousand people.

That's human nature. But why not use human nature to do the job? Why do we insist on using systems we're bad at instead

of things we're really good at? Like rumour-mongering and trying to get other people into trouble so we can have their jobs?

I'm not joking. I was once asked by the board of a multi-national to suggest ways of improving internal communications after years of frustration at the lack of success of the cascade system.

The directors wanted the entire organisation, some 3,000 people and a network of retailers, to hear about a new product as quickly as possible and preferably before the press and public found out about it.

I suggested the "grapevine" method. Something I'd pondered over in the bath a few months earlier.

Basically this meant setting up a simple system - starting with MD's secretary, who in every organisation tends to be the centre of office political intelligence. I asked her for the names of five of the company's most active rumour-mongers.

One of these was selected and the marketing director charged with the task of getting the message across to the company. I suggested he corner the rumour-monger in question in the gents toilet or convenient quiet passageway and, in passing and as part of idle conversation, say to him : "Don't tell anyone but we've decided to go ahead and launch this new product..."

It took 45 minutes for the first retailer to phone in asking if the rumour was true..." It took less than that for the message to get to everyone inside the company. Beats hell out of the cascade system.

Another communications myth in business is that it is the responsibility of a company to keep it's staff informed. Usually induced by employees continually bitching about not knowing what is going on. A nice idea but totally impractical.

For a start, how does anyone in senior management know what staff want to be informed about? In even a medium sized business if the communications department wanted to cover all the bases and keep employees well a truly satisfied, it would have to produce a newspaper roughly the size of *The Star* every week!

What managers should do when staff whinge about not being informed is to put a finger under their noses and tell them that when they want to know something to try asking!

In fact, chief executives should insist on managers encouraging staff to ask questions and impose dire penalties for not finding out and passing on the answers.

The beauty of doing things this way it that it gives the cascade system of communication a better chance of working by going at it from the bottom up. Rather like clearing a blocked lavatory by reversing the flow of water through the U-bend. A carefully chosen analogy this, because in both cases a lot of crap is cleared from the system at the same time.

It is enormously cost-effective and obviates the need to "shotgun" masses of information at employees on the assumption that it will all be of interest.

Another communications myth concerns confidentiality in management and board meetings. There is no such thing as confidentiality in business meetings.

For a start, the very fact that minutes need to be typed, duplicated and distributed to attendees means that the cat is already out of the board room. Secondly, finding a human being who is capable of keeping mum for any length of time is extremely rare. Finding five or six in the same room is impossible.

So, the basic rule of business communication is: "keeping secrets is as impossibly difficult as getting a message across to everyone..."

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

- Covid-19 boosts trust in traditional mass media - 21 Jul 2020
- Don't listen to the post-corona marketing hysteria - 17 Jun 2020
- Let's talk about marketing after corona - 15 May 2020
- Will the mass media learn anything from Covid-19? - 28 Apr 2020
- Covid-19: Secure online advice, mentoring and workshop facilitating - 23 Mar 2020

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>