

Communication: Developing the Right Boundaries

Written by Steve Marr
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Communication is a key aspect of leadership, and striking the right balance between excessive withholding of information and excessive sharing is an important part of a leader's responsibility.

Jesus modeled effective communication when He said, "I have told you everything the Father told me" (John 15:15, NLT), but also, "There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now" (John 16:12, NLT). Jesus understood the balance of providing complete communication when helpful, but also withholding information when necessary. Considering several key guidelines will help to keep your communication on track.

First, determine what information is helpful and what is not. Consider how a recipient would use the information. Peter manages a software company that develops products for the restaurant industry. He clearly communicates to his developers the key competitive advantages needed in their products, and the needs and expectations of their target customers. Further, when cash flow was tight, he shared the concern with his office staff, and asked everyone to pitch in to help collect outstanding receivables. Peter's clear communication and leadership helped everyone to be effective team players.

Many managers believe that knowledge is power, and because they want to keep that power to themselves, they commonly conceal information. The rule of thumb for effective communication is to ask yourself three key questions-Who needs to know? What do they need to know? and When do they need to know?-and communicate accordingly. Failure to share important information in a timely manner reduces the effectiveness of your staff. An air freight company that had decided to eliminate routes to South America delayed its public announcement for two months. Their sales staff continued to sell those routes, totally unaware of the impending change. Even if management had decided it was important to keep the decision confidential, they still could have directed their employees to de-emphasize the South American trade, while emphasizing the Asian and European routes. The withholding of information caused a large misdirection of resources. Additionally, their salespeople felt embarrassed when the business they had signed up was abandoned.

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The owner of a hardware store would not tell his employees when new and seasonal merchandise was scheduled for delivery. Consequently, sales clerks were unable to inform customers when to expect items such as snow shovels to arrive-and the store lost customers. The reality was that the owner liked the power of being the only one in the know, but the result was poor communication to his customers.

At the other extreme are managers who don't know when to keep their mouths shut. Some are critical of company policy, or of their boss. Paul wrote that Christians "should show full respect for their masters so they will not bring shame on the name of God and his teaching" (1 Timothy 6:1, NLT). When we dishonor our bosses, we undercut the authority within our organization. Two likely events will follow: Employees will lose confidence in the company and in senior leadership, and morale will suffer. Also, if you mock your superiors, your subordinates will feel free to mock you, undercutting your leadership. Some managers deliberately share confidential information with the intention of hurting others, which only weakens the overall organization.

Other leaders use poor judgment in sharing too many personal details. A manager's staff is not an emotional support team. If you are going through a difficult personal time, such as a divorce or problems with your kids, sharing the facts of the situation with your staff may be warranted, but discussing your situation day after day will only undermine your authority. Personal support should come from your family, friends, and church, not your workplace colleagues.

As a leader, you are the gatekeeper of information for your staff. One of your key responsibilities is to know when to open and close the gate. King Solomon said, "A truly wise person uses few words" (Proverbs 17:27, NLT). Effective communication requires selecting your words carefully-opening the gateway of effective communication regularly, while keeping the gate shut on all inappropriate discussion. Share everything that is helpful, keep other information to yourself, and be guided by Paul's instructions: "Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them" (Ephesians 4:29, NLT).

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