

COMMUNICATING IN THE FEED AND GRAIN BUSINESS:



Are You Getting What I'm Saying?

(talking, radio broadcast, newspaper, etc.) and a receiver (typically a person). As can be seen in Figure 1 below, there are opportunities along the way for “noise” to enter into the system. This noise can be true noise (think about communicating with your mill foreman above the din of a noisy feed mixer) or noise resulting from interfering thoughts, distractions or other messages being received at the same time. If you have children, its making sure you have their “full undivided attention,” which usually starts with eye contact, (and them pausing the video game or ending the cell phone call) to ensure they hear what you are saying. This same concept applies to your employees, making sure that your message is received. Even then, this can be reinforced by writing down the message to ensure the receiver has the words and/or thoughts you want to communicate. The point is to try to reduce any interference or noise that may occur, by communicating clearly as well as picking the proper time and place for communications to ensure full attention. Encoding is the process of putting the message into words (written or spoken), or symbols or pictures. Decoding occurs when the receiver translates the words, symbols or pictures into a concept or information that they can understand.

Communication is key because it is how we let other people know our feelings, and more important-

Communication. Talking, listening, reading, writing . . . it all seems so simple. Yet we know how easily “wires can get crossed,” when we don’t listen to what somebody is saying (how many times has that caused arguments between you and your significant other), or when we misread a letter or e-mail, or when we don’t talk to or phone someone at a crucial time. In this month’s column, we discuss communication; its importance and perhaps some ways to communicate with different audiences that you have not thought about before.

Communication: What is it and why is it important?

According to Webster, communication is “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.” To discuss this a bit further, for communication to occur, the requirements needed are: a source (or sender), the medium

ly, — in business, it is how we convey our desires to employees in terms of the tasks they are to perform and how good of a job they are doing.

Listening is an integral part of communication — and oftentimes the most overlooked part. As managers, we want to make sure that our employees hear what we have to tell them. However, some experts state that good managers listen 80% of the time, and talk the remaining 20% of the time. Good listening is

a useful skill and requires some effort. Management guru Stephen Covey differentiates listeners as those listening to reply, and those listening to understand.

Dan Bobinski, CEO of Leadership Development, Inc., states there are several steps to effective listening. The first step is to focus totally on the other person, making sure you put your thoughts and feelings aside. When we focus on the other person, we pick up nuances; the thoughts and feelings surrounding their words. The second step is to restate the other person’s ideas in our own words. This demonstrates to the other party that you really understand what they are saying, and they can know that by your saying it out loud. Note that you are paraphrasing what they say — and this does not necessarily mean you agree with what they are saying — only that you have heard what they said. “Purposed” listening eliminates second guessing and much misunderstanding.

Interpersonal communication with others

Our initial discussion will focus on communication between supervisors and subordinates. How often

should you communicate with subordinate employees? Some people feel these types of communications should occur only when there are issues to be resolved, orders to be issued or during evaluations. However, we tend to agree with experts that state that communications should be relatively frequent — so as to help solve small problems before they become big ones. Obviously, this frequency depends

on the size of your staff and how responsibilities are divided in your firm. At the minimum, brief discussion (see “the Huddle,” discussed later) should occur daily. If you have department managers these are the people you should be meeting with frequently. If you are the general manager/owner of a smaller operation and all employees report to you, here too, daily discourse is valuable.

It is important to note that not all of this communication need be face-to-face talking. Depending on your physical location and that of your staff, phone calls can be an efficient timesaver. While talking face-to-face may be most desirable, and indicates your personal interest, it can oftentimes be a time waster — not just the travel time of two to 10 minutes to get there and back, but many times sitting down and talking with someone leads to a longer conversation due to the comfortable situation.



Figure 1. The Communication Process

Phone calls

Phone calls can also be a good tool to follow up on a conversation, or to remind others of a request. An often underutilized technique is the small conference call (as opposed

to the larger conference call which connects numerous participants – five to 15 people or so that utilizes a phone bridge, perhaps with a call-in number). Most phone companies (and almost every cel-

lular phone available) have a 3-way calling option. This technique can save countless hours out of your week by allowing you to hook up 2 other people — where perhaps you have been trying to mediate a situation or make sure you are all on the same page.

E-mail

Many of us have developed a love/hate relationship with e-mail. E-mail is absolutely great because it is quick, virtually costless and even allows for distribution of a single message to multiple recipients. However, it has become a pain for many people for the same reasons. We take delivery of useless e-mails that do not require our attention, and we receive spam (junk e-mail) which clogs up our inbox. Below are some key management tips for both sending and receiving e-mail:

1. **Let your e-mail program manage your e-mail as much as possible.** Most programs have spam filtering. Configure your e-mail rules so as to send spam directly to the trash; then you do not waste time reading and deleting it.
2. **Don't check e-mail on demand.** Some e-mail programs announce the arrival of new e-mail: "You have mail!" Turn off these announcements as checking e-mail immediately upon its arrival interferes with other things you're trying to accomplish. This goes along with No. 3 below.
3. **Don't read and answer e-mail all day long.** For many people, e-mail can almost become an addiction — where they feel a need to constantly check it. Now, it is important to stay on top of it (see No. 5 below), but almost all e-mails

do not need to be answered immediately. We figure if someone needs an immediate response they will telephone you. However, because of the speed of e-mail delivery, many people have become accustomed to looking for an immediate response with most people at least counting on a response in a day or so. Thus, a good e-mail management strategy is to set aside particular times each day when you will look at your e-mail and answer it. Perhaps it is to read it three times/day (first thing

"We take delivery of useless e-mails that do not require our attention, and receive spam which clogs up our inbox."

in the morning, right after lunch, and right before you leave in the evening), with answering e-mail delegated to the morning slot.

4. **Don't answer your e-mail during your most productive time of your day.** Many people are most productive first thing in the morning, when they are wide awake and ready to face the day. Answering e-mail is not typically a task that takes a lot of creativity, so you might consider leaving it until late in the day. This will free up time when you can be most efficient with things that need sharp mental prowess — such as management, personnel and finance decisions.

5. **Never leave e-mail in your**

inbox (or leave as few as possible) — always take action. This means respond to the e-mail right away, archive it for reference, or turn it into a task to be followed up on. The thought here is the same as

clearing your desk— handle items as few times as possible — both physically and electronically!

6. **Use good e-mail etiquette.** The web site emailreplies.com lists a number of key tips for sending

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e-mails, and we have listed several key points here:

- Be concise and to the point.
- Answer all questions so as to preempt further questions.
- Use proper spelling, grammar

and punctuation.

- Make it personal
- Don't attach unnecessary files.
- Do not write in CAPITALS (it's considered shouting).
- Read your e-mail before you

send it.

h. Do not overuse "Reply to All."

Notes

For many of us Post-it notes® have become a very useful tool. Handwritten Post-it® notes can be utilized effectively and don't need to be onerous in terms of time expended. We can write short notes to our employees and stick them to papers they need to look at or read. Or they can be used to compliment an employee on a job well done. An even better way is to use a company notecard or a "Thanks" card. Short notes can be added to items we mail to people to clarify our intent. Notes can be overdone, but experience tells us most managers underutilize written notes.

Meetings - a key form of communication

Meetings are a very useful form of communication, as they provide the medium for transfer of key information, (especially when they are not overused, are well planned and are run efficiently). We tackled putting together effective meetings in our Manager's Notebook column in the August/September 2006 issue of FEED AND GRAIN and discussed a number of meeting types. However, there are a couple of additional points that we can make below regarding meetings and communications.

The huddle

One meeting type not discussed in our earlier column is one that management consultant Joan Lloyd feels contributes to efficiency and can be likened to "oiling" the system. The huddle is a stand-up type meeting (usually no longer than 15

to 20 minutes) right in the work area. Its format is loose and assesses how things are going and assists in figuring out if changes are needed.

Quarterly or biannual business meetings

Creating an atmosphere where employee empowerment can occur is an excellent management strategy. For employees to feel comfortable making decisions at their level, it helps for them to know how your business works - raw materials

"Notes can be overdone, but experience tells us most managers underutilize written notes."

costs, how your firm makes money and what your customers are saying. Where your company wants to go in the long and short term should be shared with employees, which will help them see the big picture. How much and what you share with your employees is up to you, particularly in a closely held business. However, careful sharing of some of this sort of data can assist in motivating your employees toward sales, production and efficiency goals and contribute to a real team approach.

Other forms of communication

When you look at the audiences you communicate with on a regular basis, sometimes it makes

sense to put together a more formal communiqué. Many firms find newsletters fill this role very well. Customer newsletters can be written, printed and mailed separately or included with

monthly customer statements.

Topics might include grain market updates; new feed products; customer interviews or testimonials; employee introductions/interviews, livestock management strategies,

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or grain marketing strategies. Many of these same topics will work for an employee newsletter, which might include additional topics such as discussion of your firm's health insurance (which you can ask your insurance company to write for you), or graphs relaying information on company performance – tons of feed shipped, bushels of grain throughput or others.

If you have a website, many of the articles you put in your newsletter can be posted and archived on your website. This is a convenient way to make them available to people who don't receive your mailings. Websites are also a useful form of communication if they are updated on a regular basis. Much has been written about developing websites, and today many feed and grain businesses use them to good advantage. They can communicate contact information, current market news and many other useful items.

Good communication is essential

Good, effective communication is an integral part of being an effective manager of a feed and grain business. Communication is one of those areas that can almost always be improved. Listening is an essential part of the communication loop and will often help you uncover real gems— if you ask the right questions. A technique that some good managers use is to poll key employees for feedback — to check to see if you are communicating often enough and what sort of message your employees are "actually" hearing. How does that compare to what you intend?

Freeman Teague, Jr. once said, "Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood." With this quote in mind, it makes good sense to work on our communication skills! ■

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