

LESSON 14

The Law of COMMUNICATION

“Interaction Fuels Action”

Communication Power in ACTION!

When Gordon Bethune took over Continental Airlines in 1994, the company was a mess. It suffered through ten changes in leadership in ten years. It had gone through bankruptcy proceedings twice. Its stock was at pitiful \$3.25 a share. It had not made a profit in a decade. Customers were flocking away from the airline. Those who used the Airline were rarely happy and they quoted, “The planes just came and went as they happened to with no predictability” and that’s not what business travelers are looking for in an airline!

What were the problems? When the company is in bad shape, the employees can’t help from being affected. Morale at Continental was low. Cooperation was nonexistent. Communication was at all time low. Employees were lied too often that they didn’t believe anything that they were told.

What did Bethune do to save the company? He knew what to do and that was to change the culture of the company and the key is **COMMUNICATION**. Positive interaction will turn the company around. If he could win the communication battle, he believed he could get the employees to work together again for the good of the team, customers and stockholders.

What were the steps taken? First, he opened up the executive offices to the rest of the team. Previously, the executive office occupied the 20th floor suite and was guarded like a fortress. Nobody could enter without proper ID and security cameras were everywhere. What Bethune did was to open up the doors and hosted open houses for the employees to *break down the intimidation factor between leaders and the rest of the team*. The next thing was to break the old bureaucracy that had been developed over the years. Previously, rules and manuals had taken the place of communication and the use of judgment. The nine-inch-thick book was known as the “Thou shall not” book. It was so detail that it even contained the color pencil that’s supposed to be used by an agent on boarding pass! Bethune gathered all employees at the carpark and set off the manuals in open public. The message was clear; everything at Continental was certainly going to change! Continental did not change overnight. When Bethune and Brenneman laid out their “Go Forward Plan”, the employees were skeptical. But the *leaders kept meeting with the people, committed on being honest with them and maintained their patience. Whether the news was good or bad, they told them to the people. They put up bulletin boards in every employee area, which showed their company ratings with other airlines and daily news updates from the company. They created a weekly voice-mail message for everyone on the team. They put lots of communication in writing using monthly newsletter*. It took time and eventually the company began to turn. Employees started to trust their leaders and began to work and trust each other.

What about now? Today Continental’s service is among the best in its industry. Employee morale is high. Company is profitable. In 1994 when Bethune took over, the company lost \$204 million and in just 1 year time, the company made a profit of \$202 million. The next year it doubled again. Continental had posted 24-time consecutive profitable quarters while its competitors were struggling to survive in the same period.

- Bethune communication policy was: Unless it's dangerous or illegal for us to share it, we share it".
- Effective teams have teammates who are constantly talking to one another.
- To perform to its utmost level, people in to need to talk and listen to one another.
- John W. Gardner, "If I had to name a single all-purpose instrument of leadership, it would be communication".

Learning how to develop good communication in four areas:

1) From leaders to Teammates

Leadership rises and falls on leadership. You must be able to communicate to lead others effectively. Standards to practice when you communicate: **1) Be consistent.** Leaders need to be able to make up their mind. It'll be best if team members always knew what is on the leader's mind. **2) Be clear.** Your team cannot execute if the members don't know what you want. Impress people with your straightforwardness. **3) Be courteous.** Everyone deserves to be shown respect. Set the tone for the entire organization.

Teams always reflect their leader. Best leaders listen, invite and then encourage participation. It shouldn't be dictatorial or a top-down manner.

2) From Teammates to Leader

Good team leaders never want yes-men. They want direct and honest communication from the people. Encourage members to speak openly and directly to us. If you feel that some plans just won't work, say it out before it happened. Another quality team members need to display when communicating to their leaders is **respect**. Leading a team is not easy because it demands personal sacrifice and sometimes has to make some unpopular decisions. Thus, team members should respect the person who has agreed to take on that role and show him loyalty.

3) Among Teammates

Few people are successful unless a lot of other people want them to be. In a successful team, team members should communicate for the common good and exhibiting the following qualities: **1) Being supportive.** "Ask not what your teammates could do for you but ask what you can do for your teammates." – Magic Johnson. Communication that is focussed on giving rather than getting takes the team to a whole new level. **2) Staying current.** Teammates who constantly open up old wounds and problems don't work together. **3) Being vulnerable.** Teams are like little communities, and they develop only when the people in them don't posture with one another.

4) Between the Team and the Public

When approached by people from outside the group, team members must remember three Rs: receptive, responsive and realistic. The more independent the team members are, the

more difficult that can be. It's not easy to get eagles to fly in formation. Yet the power of unity is incredible.

Team thoughts: Communication increases Connection

Becoming better team member:

- How committed are you to communicating with the other members of your team?
- Are you supportive of everyone even to those who aren't your friends?
- Are you holding a grudge on anyone in the team?
- If you are, you need to clear the air. If there are any barriers to good communication, you need to remove them. That's your responsibility.

Becoming a better team leader:

- As a leader of an organization, you set the tone for communication.
- A leader's communication must be consistent, clear and courteous.
- Leaders must also be good listeners.
- When leaders don't listen: They stop gaining wisdom, they stop "hearing" what isn't being said, team members stop communicating, their indifference spreads to other areas.
- Ultimately, poor listening leads to hostility, miscommunication and a breakdown of team cohesion.
- Ask for feedback concerning your listening skills from your boss, mentor, colleagues, and subordinates.
- If you get low marks for them, its time to quiet down, listen up, and work to become a better communicator.

