



Creating an Environment for Open Communication

© Gloria Thomas, president Wizard Workforce Development Inc. All rights reserved.

To suggest that you want to create a workplace environment where individuals speak freely is like saying you want to create a workplace environment that contains oxygen. People will always find ways to speak freely.

It's just that they don't always speak to the individuals who need to hear what they have to say.

If open communication among all employees and between employees and management is not occurring, that doesn't mean employees are not communicating. They're just communicating with one another: outside the workplace, among intra-office cliques, to employees in other departments. If these are the most active communication avenues, the boss and other vital personnel won't know what's up.

Leaders must put themselves in a position to hear what is pertinent to their team's well-being and survival, because leaders can have the greatest impact on the environment of a department, agency or branch of an organization.

However, every individual can apply some of these ideas to encourage others to communicate more openly and learn to work as a communication strategist to help create a functional work environment.

Why don't leaders take steps to create an environment where communication is open and effective? In the simplest terms, leaders are afraid...

- Afraid that if they encourage employees to openly share input, the employees will never shut up.
- Afraid of saying **no** to employees or putting their demands on hold, because employees might resent them.
- Afraid of being forced to deal with employees' emotions.
- Afraid that by opening up to employee input, they'll lose their authority or seem inept.
- Afraid of the sheer numbers. Leaders are almost always outnumbered!

What can leaders do to overcome these fears? They can develop high-level communication skills. Then they can work with their team to create an environment where communication avenues are open, active, healthy, constructive and functional—perhaps even fun.

4 tips for developing an environment where open communication flourishes:

1. Be alert to signs of discontent.

When employees are rolling their eyes and sighing, that's a clue that communication is being blocked and rerouted. The source of this discontent must be uncovered. Yet, it is too often ignored because leaders either feel powerless to change it or they think it's ***just the way employees are***.

2. Trust, respect and encourage employees.

It shouldn't need to be said, but it does: Employees are your **most** important asset. Make everyone on your team feel safe and secure. Employees have fears, too.

Unleashing the Communication Potential of Individuals and Organizations.™

Fear (in all forms) is *the* catalyst for creating dysfunctional communication environments. The resulting behaviors are counterproductive. Worried, fearful employees either: **1) Shut up, build up walls and defenses and eventually shut down** **or 2) Find allies and build cliques of complainers and shirkers.**

3. Trust yourself.

To be a good leader requires confidence and communication skills on a par with a skilled negotiator or mediator. Learn everything you can about communication (which also entails learning about yourself and others). Then you will be able to trust yourself to maintain the optimum level of openness and handle any employee situation that arises in an open communication environment.

4. Persevere-don't give up too easily.

Rarely allow a vital discussion to end with ***Let's just agree to disagree***. Though this can sometimes be useful, if overused, it sends the message that exploring issues is not welcomed. If you think a flower is mauve and someone else thinks it's coral, agreeing to disagree is fine. If you weren't likely to be dealing with this person regularly, it would be okay.

With key issues and with people you need to have an ongoing relationship, agreeing to disagree becomes problematic. Those disagreements can pile up quickly until all that's left is a disagreeable silence.

It might save time in the short run, but will be costly later. You must dig deeper. You can move ahead, but you can't leave an important workplace-related issue unresolved forever. I recommend "moving together without agreement," which entails keeping the disagreement close at hand, with a specific plan to get back to it. This is an action-oriented approach that leaves the door open and encourages parties to dig deeper for truths and points of agreement.

I'll conclude with a story that illustrates EXTREME perseverance:

You might have guessed that I'll go to any lengths to open up communication, whether working with an organization where employee morale is suffering due to dysfunctional communication practices—or when communicating with members of my family. My husband of 28 years is a candid, effective communicator. Still, like many wives, I sometimes wonder whether he's being completely open about how he feels about something.

One evening, over a period of approximately an hour, I asked him several versions of the eternal question, "Is there something you're annoyed with me about that you aren't saying?" After hearing **no** several times, I finally blurted out: *Well, if you **WERE** annoyed with me, what would it be about—hypothetically?* Once it dawned on us what I had said, we had a good laugh. I do enjoy experimenting with different approaches to communication!

Gloria Thomas is the president of Wizard Workforce Development Inc., a Richmond, Virginia based training and consulting firm. Visit the Wizard Inc. website www.wizardinc.com or call 804.674.6111 for more information.

Unleashing the Communication Potential of Individuals and Organizations.™