

Great Communication Mitigates Risk



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Last week we welcomed a new staff member to the Center, Arley Turner. At the Center, communication skills top the list of what it takes to get hired and succeed. So for this week's **RISK eNews**, we decided to try something new: a conversation about the interplay of communication, risk and office dynamics.

Melanie: As you've learned already, we spend a lot of time at the Center talking about the importance of effective communication. We can't teach risk management to busy nonprofit leaders if we use archaic terms or impractical examples. We also try to use references from popular culture to make risk management fun. When you look back on your college years, was there a particular course that made an impact on your understanding of communication in the business world?

Arley: Yes! One of the most memorable courses in my program was a class on organizational communication. And although we read some fascinating academic pieces on workplace communication styles, the most effective course teaching aid was the film, "Office Space." The film did a terrific job of showing the consequences of poor communication in the workplace.

Melanie: I can't believe I've never seen that film! I remember watching the early episodes of "The Office" on BBC America, which brought back memories of a job I'd rather forget, from way back in the 1980s. What were some of the memorable lessons from "Office Space"?

Arley: At Initech, the fictional company portrayed in the film, ineffective communication kept the company at constant risk of legal trouble. The most prominent example involved an employee named Milton, who continued receiving a paycheck after being fired. Even worse, he kept coming to work! For a while, no one seemed to notice Milton. And when people did notice, they would just ask him to move his desk to a new location out of their way. But the most important lesson for me was that effective office communications requires courage. Even after management realized the error and stopped paying Milton, management refused to speak to him directly about his termination. And ironically, that's when the real trouble for the company began.

Melanie: It's taken me many years to appreciate the importance of courageous communication in the workplace. Failing to communicate honestly and in a timely fashion puts a nonprofit's mission at risk. It also causes the unnecessary erosion of the relationships that are the glue that hold the mission together during tough times. And without trust between co-workers and open communication, a charitable mission is nothing more than a pithy phrase on a banner in the lobby.

Got Communication Risk? Practical Tips for Nonprofits

After our conversation, Arley and I realized we could combine what I have learned in the business (mostly the hard way, by making lots of mistakes!) and her class knowledge, to offer up some practical tips for courageous communications in the workplace:

- **Stop Whispering and Start Sharing** – Unfortunately, many nonprofit leaders continue to believe the axiom “information is power.” A more appropriate version in today’s workplace is: “Sharing information is powerful.” When employees feel that important news about changing priorities, reporting relationships and funding sources are a secret, they become anxious and disillusioned. And instead of enthusiastically supporting mission-advancing programs, they lose faith and confidence in those at the helm. Loss of faith in the integrity of the executive team is a serious and unnecessary, downside risk.
- **Skip the Jargon and Be Clear about Expectations** – One of the most difficult challenges in any office is preventing a discrepancy between what an employer wants and requires, and the work product an employee delivers. Who’s to blame? In some cases you may hire someone who simply isn’t able to do the work that you require. But in other cases the employer’s failure to communicate is the real issue. Avoid useless jargon and overly vague terms, and be explicit about what you need and when you need it. Make it clear whether you expect an employee to ask lots of questions up front, or head off to their cubicle to “figure it out.”
- **Don’t Ignore the Milton... or the Elephant in the Room** – One of the most common mistakes in office communications is ignoring an obvious problem between two or more employees and hoping it will go away. Co-worker problems rarely dissipate without face-to-face communication. Insist that employees who disagree learn to do so without being petulant, and remind everyone that a simple apology can help everyone get back on track. Be a role model by showing staff how to address misunderstandings or bad behavior in a way that sets the stage to move forward. When you’ve been overly critical, rude or disrespectful, take a minute at the next staff meeting to say, “Joe, I want to say that I’m really sorry I was rude to you on Friday. An impending deadline is no excuse to treat anyone here with less than great respect.”

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