

Want to Communicate More? Communicate Less

Amazon teaches a lesson in counter-intuitive thinking.

My mind goes back to a time years ago when I approached my board with a series of cost-cutting measures directed at reducing the size of our company so that we could generate some modicum of cash flow in spite of rapidly declining revenue. Instead of praising what I thought was a “brilliant plan,” one board member took me head-on and argued that trying to cost reduce ourselves into prosperity was shortsighted, and instead we should risk even more money and try to grow by acquiring a competitor. Spend more money at a time when we were barely making ends meet? To me that was totally counterintuitive. But it worked.

Earlier this year another example of counterintuitive thinking answered a question that had plagued me throughout the two-plus decades I have been running and consulting with manufacturing and finishing companies:

“How do we get our people to communicate better?”

A management theory espouses the concept that the problems in any business can generally be traced back to just a few root causes and by solving these core issues in the business, many if not most, of the resulting problems will go away. An interesting exercise involves sitting a team around a table and asking its members to brainstorm problems in their business and record each on a Post-it note which is then stuck to the table. The process continues until the table is littered with Post-it notes summarizing every problem the team identifies.

Team members are then asked to rearrange the notes in such a way that problems caused by other problems are placed further from the center. For instance, late deliveries to customers may be caused by machine downtime which may in

turn be caused by poor preventive maintenance. The late deliveries Post-it would lie further from the center than would the poor preventive maintenance one. Once this task is complete, so the theory goes, the items at the center of the table are those problems that cause many of the others. Fix those and fix them all.

I have performed this process with a variety of organizations and have found it to work fairly well. Invariably, though, a yellow sticky with the words “Poor Communication” can often be found near the center of the table.

So what to do about that problem? Can we simply order our people to come into work the following day and communicate more? Good luck with that. Would offering classes

on better communication resolve the issue? Not likely. So for as many times as “poor communication” was identified as a major problem, its resolution eluded me.

Remarkably, though, the solution came to me earlier this year from a not-so-likely source.

Amazon!

I recently read the book *The Everything Store* in which author Jeff Stone dissects

Amazon’s eccentric, direct, and at times overbearing founder, CEO and chairman Jeff Bezos, and tells the story of how Amazon went from being a good online source for ordering books to becoming “The Everything Store.” The book was worth the time I invested in reading it if for no other reason than it answered the “Communication Question.”

In the book, Stone recounts the story of an offsite meeting during the late ’90s at which a group of junior executives presented on the challenge of coordinating the efforts of divisions separated by distance. In the presentation, delivered to Bezos and other senior members of the Amazon team, the junior executives took it upon themselves to recommend a series of techniques to improve communication across these groups.

At its conclusion, in classic Bezos fashion, the organization’s leader weighed in. “I understand what you’re saying, but you are completely wrong,” he said. “Communication is a sign of dysfunction. It means people aren’t working together in a close, organic way. We should be trying to figure out ways for teams to communicate less with each other, not more.”

Communicate better by communicating less? Talk about counterintuitive thinking!

But upon reflection it makes perfect sense. Should we:

- Remind a supervisor to expedite an order at the paint line or automate the process of communicating the expedited order directly to the machine operator?
- Remember to make a critical process change for a set of parts being run on the line or automatically measure key variables and use automation to make it?
- Track productivity in a financial report every month or



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ask machine operators to record their individual performance on a white board after each job is completed?

- Make a “to do” note to order more powder or set up a kanban or supplier managed inventory system that sends a signal to the supplier automatically?
- Communicate to the fabrication and weld departments which parts need to be run first or process product in a kit that can be delivered to the customer’s assembly operation in the exact quantity for one unit, thus eliminating WIP and downtime?
- Follow up with a sales lead when it occurs to us to do so or set up an automatic reminder in a calendar or customer relationship management system?
- Rely on memory to recall that we reduced the rectifier setting the last time we ran the part or update the work instruction?

The answers are elementarily obvious.

My epiphany moment? The “Poor communication” Post-it belongs nowhere near the center of the table. It is not a root cause; it’s a symptom of another problem, that being the absence of a systematic process or procedure that eliminates the need for communication.

Can we get to the point where hearing someone say “We just need to communicate more,” makes the hair stand up on the back of our necks? Assigning “poor communication” as the de facto root cause for our inability to meet a customer due date, quality expectation or for some other short-coming is a sign of a missing system or procedure.

Do we need to communicate more? No. We need to communicate less! Thank you, Jeff Bezos and Amazon. ■■■

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