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Communication means going out and working with users, customers, other business units, executive management, partners, suppliers, and other organizations. It is the only way the CIO can understand everyone's needs and all the requirements to effectively run the business. It means taking a proactive role in the business—not simply reacting to problems—as well as marketing and selling the IT organization. To be successful, the CIO must help users, customers, and others succeed, too. This article discusses:

- How to break down stereotypes that threaten good communication.
- The essential management practices that produce good communication.
- What to keep in mind when implementing communication tools and practices.
- How to be a better communicator.
- How to know when communication is effective.

"I don't want to see any more f***ing slides with any more f***ing arrows!"

This isn't the kind of thing you want to hear during your first big presentation to the executive staff. But that is how the VP of operations responded three slides into my 30-slide presentation on the current crisis facing our IT department.

As the recently hired CIO, I had spent hours analyzing the company's systemic IT problems and had spent untold additional hours putting together this presentation. In the hiring process, the executive team had been extremely excited about my ability to finally solve their problems, and this was my first chance to take them through it step by step. As a computer science person, that's how I'd always attacked a problem. Diagram it, get it in front of the group, and discuss the best solution.

Three slides into my presentation, I discovered that the rest of the world doesn't think the same way. I was bewildered and speechless, and that was the end of my presentation.

I didn't realize it right away, but that moment brought me face to face with the fundamental communication gap between IT people and non-IT people in any business. At the time I couldn't fathom why anyone on the executive staff wouldn't want to understand the problem. The truth is, non-IT people only want to know how IT problems will affect what they do. Everything else is too confusing, too complex, or too time consuming.

As CIO, I learned to be aware of who I was communicating with and what essential information they needed. In the case of the executive staff, they wanted to know only the gist of the problem, what I was doing about it, the cost and the timeframe, the impact on the business, and what was required of them.

That meeting was a turning point for me because I realized that succeeding as a CIO meant getting good at communicating both on a personal level and as an organization. I was like a medical student who, on his first day as a real doctor, realizes that nothing in school taught him how to have a good bedside manner.

Since then, I have learned a few things that make good communication possible. In this article, you'll learn ways to attack this problem.

## The problem: Us versus them

Like engineers, IT people excel in logistical, binary, and abstract thinking. IT people also tend not to be people persons, often leave the impression of sarcasm or superiority, and in general do not value communication skills—or those who have them. IT people may appear unconcerned with the larger process and success of the business. IT people may also appear to have no standard process or priority when handling incoming requests.

They don't realize (or appreciate) the underlying causes of these appearances. They don't realize that solving IT problems requires an intense focus on the details (not the bigger business picture) and that the speed of technological change sometimes does not allow IT people to step back and see that bigger picture. They don't

realize that compared to other business processes like finance and engineering, IT is in its infancy, and standard practices from customer support to software rollouts have not been established since mainframe-era practices were abandoned.

If nothing is done to dispel these stereotypes and appearances, miscommunication and mistrust will continue from both sides. Non-IT people will continue to see IT people as:

- Unwilling to speak except in confusing technical jargon.
- Living in a separate world and unconcerned about the business.
- Self-centered, arrogant, and passive-aggressive.
- A roadblock to the organization's success.
- A group that should be managed by another executive.

IT people will continue to see themselves as

- Misunderstood geniuses.
- Wrongly treated like second-class citizens.
- Victims of circumstance.
- Overworked, underpaid, and unappreciated.
- Not to blame for third-party software and hardware failures.
- Totally justified in indulging in this kind of behavior.

As CIO, your success depends on breaking down these appearances on both sides of the IT fence. You must set the example from the top down and ensure that your department delivers from the bottom up.

Consider how former New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani reduced crime and improved the quality of life in the city. He began by ticketing jaywalkers, loiterers, and double-parked cars. By raising the standards on what criminal behavior the city was willing to tolerate, he changed the willingness of would-be criminals to commit all crimes. I am not suggesting that you start putting bad communicators in handcuffs. The lesson here is that improving the little things—by creating a systemic improvement in what is expected—can improve the big things in the process. Many of you may feel that you lack the skills to tackle what is considered a "touchy-feely" problem. I am here to tell you that you already have all the skills, but are lacking one key distinction:

> Good communication practices should be viewed as deliverables, identical to any other business objective in your department. Give them the same priority you would give any mission-critical enterprise system rollout.

As CIO, you already have the skills and experience to roll out a major system implementation. Good communication is not that different, except that in this case, the deliverables are the tools and processes necessary for creating good communication. Let's begin by learning.

## How to break down stereotypes that threaten good communication

Changing entrenched stereotypes and misperceptions begins with you. Whatever initiatives you undertake, you as an individual have to buy into the idea that there is real benefit in making these changes. You will be the evangelist, the one dragging everyone else to new places, so here are a few essentials for success.

## Lead by example

The best way to get people to follow is to lead by example. Don't expect anyone else to buy into anything you don't believe in yourself. Make communication a priority and be passionate about the way IT is perceived and the way IT performs and communicates. Because IT touches every department, your changes can have a big impact on your own department and on communication throughout the company.

## Know your audiences

As I learned from my shocking first executive staff meeting, you must be aware of who you are communicating with and what essential information they need. Let's examine the four principle groups you regularly communicate with and what to be aware of for each.

**Executive level** (board of directors, executive staff, your direct manager, and possibly executive committees). Communication should:

- Be high level.
- Address their concerns in their language.
- Focus on impact on business and ROI.
- Be immediate.
- Take hierarchy into consideration (depending on the culture).

**IT staff level** (direct reports, entire local and remote staff, consultants and outsource vendors, and possibly special projects teams for which you are the executive sponsor). Communication should:

- Be detailed.
- Explain the technical background and architecture.
- Outline and explain requests, and justify outcomes.
- Contain clear instructions and clear conditions for satisfaction of requests.

**Internal customers level** (peers, other functional groups, desktop and network users, major application users, remote site users, and all mobile users). Communication should:

- Be clear, concise, and simple.
- Quick and precise.
- Explain the when, where, why, and why not.
- Exhibit extreme patience.
- Be repeated over and over again.
- Make it easy for recipients to access facts on their own.

**External customers level** (commercial customers using the company's products, external users of the company's Web site or major applications, and both formal and informal organizations). Communication should:

- Be politically correct.
- Be aware of revenue impact.
- Be conscious of security and breach of contract issues.
- Take the lead from the marketing and sales departments as to the approved methods of communicating with outside customers.

## Create awareness of the lines of communication

It is important that not just you, the CIO, be aware of these audiences and how to deal with them. All members of the IT staff should be familiar with all lines of communication and with what behavior is expected of them in each scenario. Push communication awareness down through your organization.

## Start thinking like a service organization

You are managing a service organization, and as such, all that matters is how your "customers" perceive you. Spend time with them, learn their processes, and constantly ask for feedback. Pay extra attention to your help desk and customer service because this is where many of the perceptions of IT communication are derived. They are the main windows into IT for most of your users.

There is no secret to success regarding good customer service. Service management by nature is a day in, day out, ongoing, never-ending, unremitting, persevering, and compassionate enterprise.

## Ask your staff for help

The people in the trenches know what is really going to work and what is going to end up in the dumb idea file. Use your staff of experts to build your communication tools and processes. By asking for help, you can build team spirit and tackle the problem of stereotypes and misperceptions together.

## Stop the blame game

It has puzzled me that IT shops often tend to be their own worst enemies. The applications group and the operations group fight with each other, the network group fights with everyone, and the desktop group always tells users it is not their fault. Not exactly a formula for success or for creating a positive perception of your IT department. The lines of communication are very complex within IT.

There are many diverse skill sets and levels of technical knowledge.. These subgroups should be communicating and planning together or they will continue to fight and blame each other for problems.

The fastest way to work on a cure to this problem is mandatory intergroup planning and review sessions, in which responsible individuals are required to review their plans and status publicly and facilitate open discussions to resolve interdependencies. The first few can be very ugly but don't give up on them. There is no simple solution to stopping the blame game, but here are a few more pointers.

## Provide accurate information

Make sure everyone in IT gets the same timely information. Require individuals to communicate their plans consistently and to be accountable for their actions. No hiding out, no whining! Institute *communication protocols* between your major groups.

**Production control.** Policies and procedures to manage the handoff between the applications group and the operations group.

**Problem management and corrective action.** Policies and procedures to manage performance issues and ensure that the same problem is not happening over and over again. This will also give the customer service group a voice and provide them with the tools and status to report back to the customers.

**Product release updates.** Maintain current update information on all changes to products in production. This will assist all groups in understanding the impact of the changes or updates and ensure that all dependencies are compatible before these updates or changes go into production. This process can be adapted from those used by commercial product development groups releasing product updates for sale. In particular, it is imperative that the networking group treat the network as a product and applies the same disciplines. How many times have we heard "It should not have affected anything!" from an engineer who made what she considered a minor change to the network, with the result that no one could log into a mission-critical application for hours. This type of thing builds bad blood among your own IT groups, shutting down many layers of communication and trust—not to mention aggravating your users.

## Foster teamwork

Integrating the groups within IT requires you to build and provide an atmosphere that fosters teamwork. Studies indicate that the major considerations involved in the integration of people from many disciplines into an effective team are:

- Effective communication from the leader and within the team.
- Sincere interest by the leader and the team in the professional growth of team members.
- Commitment to the group's success.

Let's examine the barriers to creating such an atmosphere.

To foster teamwork in your department, you must learn what encourages active participation and minimizes conflict. This requires skills in leadership, administration, organization, and technical expertise on the project. Having human resource professionals tightly linked to the entire IT planning process can be key in this effort; if your HR department cannot provide this assistance, you may have to seek outside advice. The CIO *must* ensure that someone qualified and skilled is making certain that education, career concerns, reward systems, job design, teambuilding, leadership skills, and the like are factored into IT, because they are major building blocks of effective teamwork.

Changing entrenched stereotypes and misperceptions can seem like an enormous task. However, you don't have to enact all the above-mentioned changes. Most importantly, breaking down these stereotypes and making good communication a priority begins with you.

## Essential management practices that produce good communication

Without accurate and understandable information, there is not much hope that good communication will improve your department's performance. Communication tools and processes break down in most companies because the information moving through those channels is inaccurate, out of date, or incomprehensible to the person who needs it. Good communication begins with having the ability to collect and deliver reliable information on a consistent basis.

As CIO, you need to consistently collect accurate information about all IT initiatives. You need to aggregate and interpret that information to make beneficial adjustments. Then you need to deliver this information to each group in a way that enables that group to make use of it.

Whether you are dealing with servo systems, financial results, or even our own abilities, good communication is dependant upon feedback information generated by ongoing initiatives within the organization. Thus, the first step in implementing good communication practices is implementing some key management practices.

The following is a set of IT management practices that must be in place to support good communication. Here we show how each practice supports good communication.

### Plan

If your company does not plan well, you may be inclined not to plan yourself. Unfortunately, that makes communicating difficult. Without planning, including monitoring and review processes, it is hard to accurately evaluate status, to keep everyone on the same page, and to communicate what you need to complete a given project.

### Set IT policy and standards

Without the ability to set policy and ensure that it is followed, your IT organization will constantly be at war with the rest of the organization. Having standards in place allows others to have accurate expectations of IT, which improves communication.

### Understand the company's commitments, schedules, and dependencies

As CIO, you must know what is happening throughout the entire organization. Otherwise, your IT department will be frequently blindsided and perceived as a roadblock. Take time to sit in on department staff meetings or implement your own planning meetings with key executives on a regular basis to ensure you are up to speed with their plans. This allows you to communicate to your staff and plan accordingly.

### Integrate project planning

Often, each business unit or each unit within IT develops its own planning documentation. Since most projects involve more than one unit, this lack of integration can put you behind the eight ball before a project even begins.

### Budget as a team

Budgeting must be done with the executive team. Awareness of approved, and more importantly nonapproved, initiatives must be communicated across the organization. Also, the budget must never be used as an excuse. Users hate to hear "It's not in the budget." This feeds the stereotyped perception of IT people.

### Control production changes

Without formal production control practices, your applications, operations, network, and desktop staff will continually fight and blame each other when changes create problems across your systems. If you do one thing as a result of reading this article, put a production control function in place!

### Continuously improve quality

Customers may forgive you the first time something goes wrong, maybe even the second or third. After that, don't expect any repeat business. Root-cause analysis procedures and corrective action plans must be part of your process. Include your whole team in the corrective action plan. This puts the focus on improving as a team and learning lessons without placing blame.

## Be explicit in your decision-making process

Base your decisions on visible and logical factors. When the decision-making process is transparent and explicit, the objectives, standards, costs, policies, and schedules become visible guidelines to your team and to the entire organization.

Good communication can be a lifesaver in times of crisis; it cannot cover up for consistently poor performance. With these solid IT management practices in place, communication within your department and across the organization will improve by default. With the accurate measurements and clear expectations established by these changes, you will be well on your way to good communication.

# How to make yourself a better communicator

Although we all have experience as communicators in various situations, the nature of these experiences and our comfort levels vary. For a CIO, being a good communicator means having the ability to successfully deal with the world, having good managerial and leadership abilities, and having responsibility and care for others. Are you able to express your intentions and take responsibility for the commitments and perceptions they generate? Here are a few guiding principals to assist you.

## Assess yourself

To be a great communicator, you do not have to be Winston Churchill. But you must convey the perception that you are sincere and can be trusted.

## Know your audience

Communicate in terms that your audience will understand. In all communication, keep in mind whom it is for and what they need out of it.

## Set and manage expectations

If there is a gap between what others expect of you and your IT department and what you actually deliver, you will be dealing with a frustrated and disappointed organization. Think of your communications as a set of requests and promises. Make sure that when you promise something you can follow through. If not, make sure you renegotiate your commitment.

## Insist on accountability

Accountability means being totally answerable for the satisfactory completion of a specific assignment. Take extra care to ensure that the lines of accountability are clear, both for yourself and for your team members. Eliminate from your own and your team's conversations statements such as "It's not my fault," "They made me do it," "It's not my job," "No one told me," and "It couldn't be helped."

## Be aware of the political environment

Make a point of spending time with your peers; schmooze and promote your department's activities and accomplishments. Don't hesitate to create a department newsletter or find other avenues to publicize and communicate your department's contributions. Spend time listening to how others perceive your IT department. Build your own capacity for good communication and don't let fear shut you down. Meanwhile, make sure that your staff gets adequate communication training.

# How to know when communication is good

Measure it. By implementing monitoring tools, you can give yourself a set of metrics and indicators as to how well you are doing on your journey to communication nirvana. These tools do not have to be elaborate. The following key metrics will be good indicators of improvement.

## Measure behavioral improvements

Have there been changes in the way IT communicates with customers? Are you getting closer to your customers? Is their perception of IT changing for the better? Is staff morale getting better? One way to find out is to take a poll. Ask staff members to rate morale within the department right now and ask what they would like to see improved. Tally the results and repeat this simple survey monthly.

Is the blame game less prominent during production control or other staff meetings? This is a strong soft indicator that the teams are starting to gel and work together. Is employee retention improving? Soothing the combative atmosphere created by lack of communication can go a long way toward helping you retain good employees. Is the executive team more supportive and educated on IT projects? Some of these are questions you need to ask only of yourself. Make sure you do it consistently. Make it part of your daily awareness.

## Process improvements

Ask yourself, is good information being created and communicated throughout your department on a timely basis?

## Improvements in IT business fundamentals

Customer satisfaction can be simple too. Ask customers to rate each IT support call. In addition, perform a customer satisfaction survey before a project and quarterly thereafter. Other metrics include system up time, average time of trouble ticket closure, and on-time project completions.

# Conclusion

The IT department touches every business process and every member of your organization. Creating consistent avenues for accurate and timely information flow is essential, both for information flowing out of IT and for feedback information flowing into IT. That is the essence of good communication practices. Needless to say, good communication practices cannot make up for, or even be possible, without good management practices that create consistent, accurate, and timely measurements of IT initiatives. Don't kid yourself: Changing the entrenched practices and stereotypes within your organization is a giant undertaking. So let me leave you with a few simple ground rules.

First, you have to buy into the idea of change. You have to believe that there is a real bottom-line benefit to your business in changing your department's and company's bad habits. In the beginning, you may be the lone voice asking people to make these changes in the way they behave and feel. To sustain that position, you have to have a tangible sense of purpose in your effort.

Second, understand that creating the right tools for your team and building more productive habits and perceptions is going to be a process of discovery both for you and for your department. This perspective is essential; it allows you to constantly search for bottlenecks in the process and ask how to improve them. Build the idea of discovery into your approach.

Third, take from this discussion only what applies to you. Your business is unique; apply the advice that works for you. Identify the tools you need and get them in place. Give your team incentives to break down stereotypes on both sides of the IT wall. Take personal responsibility for your communication and be committed to improvement. Most importantly, measure your progress. In other words, make it a priority to improve and check your results against the goals you have set.

Fourth, begin with one specific improvement. From the above discussion, you may rightly believe that moving toward good communication practices for you and your department is a huge endeavor. I suggest keeping it simple. Identify one particular change you can make to improve one specific communication avenue in your organization. Whether it is improving the response time of your help desk or revising procedure and documentation for systems changes, fix one thing you know how to fix. From this success you can expand your initiative. After all, you now have a track record of success in reforming your communication practices.

IT is woven into the very fabric of every modern organization, which means that changing communication practices is a big job. But it is also a chance to have a big impact. From customer support to the CEO, the changes you accomplish can make an immediate difference across the entire business.

*The Enterprise Computing Institute ([www.ecinst.com](www.ecinst.com)) helps IT professionals solve problems and simplify the management of IT through consulting and training based on the best-selling Enterprise Computing Institute book series. Founded by Harris Kern ([www.harriskern.com](www.harriskern.com)), the industry's foremost expert on simplifying IT and world-renowned American author, publisher, lecturer, and consultant, the Institute has focused on providing practical guidance for tackling current IT challenges since its inception in 1998.*

# Additional resources

- TechRepublic's **Downloads RSS Feed** **XML**
- Sign up for our Downloads Weekly Update newsletter
- Sign up for our CIO Issues Newsletter
- Check out all of TechRepublic's free newsletters
- "Provide essential information with this project communication plan" (TechRepublic download)
- "IT managers: How well do you communicate?" (TechRepublic download)
- "Harness the power of the informal communications network" (TechRepublic article)
- "Maximize your chances for success with good communication skills" (TechRepublic article)

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