

Engineering Solutions to the Communication Problem

BY MARK GOODALE



Let's face it. Communication has always been a struggle for engineers—so much so that there's no shortage of jokes on the subject. For example, how do you tell the extroverted engineer from the introverted engineer? He's the one staring at your shoes instead of his own.

But all good-natured ribbing aside, the issue is getting more serious, and it's having a significant effect throughout the industry. My partner, Mick Morrissey, says that due to heavy workloads and staffing shortages, what little communication did exist is rapidly deteriorating at and between all levels within engineering firms. The problem is manifesting itself in many ways, particularly in the form of poor quality deliverables and sliding morale.

No magic formula improves communication and teamwork. It takes daily practice—a true change of habit—otherwise most anything done in this area will be seen as a gimmick or flavor of the month. Engineers are skeptical, and half-hearted attempts at addressing soft issues will quickly lead to cynicism and a loss of leadership capital. So if you are not willing to jump in with both feet, stop reading here. If you are serious about a culture shift in your firm, then here's what you need to do:

Understand the chain of dysfunctions in your company. Lots of firm leaders' teeth-gnashing and hand-wringing is over the issue of accountability—and with good reason. Why would anyone want their firm full of people whose own agendas supersede the needs of the team? But you can't simply demand your way to accountability because people have to buy in to something before they can be held accountable.

Buy in requires open and healthy dialogue. But therein lies the rub, especially for engineers who find open and honest conversations difficult. The problem is not so much one of introversion. In fact, introversion has nothing to do with sociability. It's defined by how a person draws his energy. For example,

some folks recharge their batteries by turning inward, and others recharge their batteries by circulating with other people. The more important aspect of achieving open dialogue is whether your firm has a foundation of trust. Can people say what's on their minds without fear of reprisal or being marginalized? If not, most of the worthwhile conversations are probably happening in pairs outside in the hallway instead of the meeting room where decisions are ultimately made.

Build trust. Building trust can be achieved by assessing individual employee strengths and administering personality type indicators to break down misconceptions. While this takes time up front, it will build a baseline of understanding between employees. They end up spending less time misattributing behavior and more time trying to meet their colleagues halfway

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because they know what their teammates are good at, what they struggle with, and how they process information.

Encourage healthy conflict. Engineers typically shy away from conflict. But healthy conflict can be encouraged. Try this next time you are running a meeting: When someone shows the courage to speak openly and honestly, interrupt the meeting and say, "That's exactly the kind of contribution we need to be getting on a regular basis from this group. Excellent job." This is called "giving permission in the moment" and will encourage others to participate in a similar way.

Master the skill of making and keeping reliable promises. Any meaningful communication between two people involves a call for action, especially in engineering firms, which are mainly project-driven organizations. Mastering the skill of communicating clear conditions of satisfaction and inviting negotiation from the performer translates into efficiency and client value. But it

takes practice. First you need to practice observing all four elements of a promise in every conversation—a clear customer, a clear performer, a clear definition of satisfaction, and a specific deadline. Without each of these elements, you have a hope or a good intention, but you don't have a promise. Then practice building reliability into each promise by asking questions.

- Do you have the competence, or access to the competence, to do what you are being asked to do?
- Are the conditions of satisfaction clear?
- Do you know how long it will take?
- Do you have the time to do it?
- Have you allocated capacity to the task?

Involving the performer in this dialogue will increase the likelihood that your request will be fulfilled on time and the right way. Consider asking other questions, such as,

"What unspoken conversation are you having right now about what I just asked you to do," to determine the sincerity of the promise.

Ultimately, the best way to address communication challenges is by making sure that teammates know each other better and talk and listen on a daily basis. As the workforce in our industry gets stretched more and more every day, the soft issues are becoming the hard issues. And not talking and not listening are among the biggest problems.

Mark Goodale is a principal at Morrissey Goodale (www.morrisseygoodale.com), a strategy consulting firm dedicated to the design and environmental industry.