

It's About Communication – Really

By Joe Whitefield

For facilities managers, every day can be assessment day. We are fully engaged in facilities management programs that involve developing strategies and establishing goals, leveraging resources, leading people, and managing the execution of the various steps toward goal attainment, while promoting a positive and healthy work environment. Effective leadership not only steers these programs and processes, but also seeks to improve them. And continuous improvement requires continuous evaluation.

How applicable is the strategy? How relevant are the goals? How well are we performing? What should we add, change, or discontinue? Answers to these questions are being revealed every day in some form – even if the questions are not being formally asked.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

With that as a backdrop, there is one aspect of leadership that's value is easily underestimated in this “get it done” environment—that is communication. Yes, everyone knows communication is important, but do we know just how important? Communications consultant Bob Aronson says, “If communication is not your top priority, all of your other priorities are at risk.” As I reflect on my organization, I am coming to believe this statement is quite true and is, therefore, becoming more important every day.

The topic of communication can be broad and somewhat complicated due to its many facets. Still, most people agree that communication is important in any organization and/or relationship. Many will even confess to be lacking

in some communication skills. But the urgent matters of the day take over, demanding our time, and leaving little or no attention—to our communication processes.

Many times, poor communication can be the actual cause of a particular problem. You might recall the St. Louis Cardinals winning the 2010 World Series in seven games. But did you remember that they lost game five of the series when there was a communication problem between the manager and bullpen coach? And so, the Cardinals best pitcher was not ready to pitch in the 8th inning. The Texas Rangers got a key hit that drove in the decisive runs in their win. The strategies were in place and the players were prepared, however the game turned on one phone call. Thankfully for the Cardinals, and their fans, they won the next two games to win the series—even though they came within a single strike (on two separate occasions) of losing the series in game six.

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The effects of poor communication are the same in our organizations. Even if it is not the root problem, poor communication can simply make a problem worse. Either way, effective communication is a critical component of a healthy facilities maintenance organization.

Let me recommend that you take time to review the simple idea of communication

C Completion
O Organization
I Innovation
N Being Nice

within your organization and across your campus. Between phones, faxes, e-mails, texts, tweets, meetings, presentations, and face-to-face conversations, there is no shortage of contact.

But not all contact is communication. Today, we can be inundated with so much data and information that it is a challenge to sort the relevant and useful from the irrelevant. Think about important information that needs to be shared that is routinely not shared. Think about information that is being shared but not understood. Think about information that is being shared that doesn't need to be. Think about the methods used to share information. Do they promote understanding? Or do they add to confusion and misunderstandings? And think about the timing of communication.

There are three basic periods of communication. Communication before an activity begins sets the expectations, defines success, and establishes points of accountability. Communication throughout an activity reports on execution and provides progress updates. Post-activity communication provides feedback and critiques outcomes versus expectations. Each of the issues should be tailored for your different audiences.

COMMUNICATION WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION

One great benefit to communication within a department or organization is that the individuals are typically more knowledgeable about the subject matter. When it comes to facility issues, facilities management personnel speak the same language. This offers advantages in that words can be conserved and time can be spent performing work rather than discussing it.

Problems arise, however, when familiarity leads to communication being taken for granted. We may assume too much knowledge or understanding on the part of others and vice versa. Information omission causes gaps in knowledge transfer or, at times, a misunderstanding of intent which can lead to poor performance. Communicating intent along with the usual instructions can paint the bigger picture. This level of understanding confers some of the responsibility for knowledge transfer to the receiver as well as the messenger. Questions, clarifications, and verifications, especially early in a process, are all signs of healthy communications that can lead to better performance of any activity.

COMMUNICATION ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS

Non-facilities people are often, but not always, less knowledgeable of facilities related issues. This poses a real challenge when considering the need to communicate enough information to be helpful, without providing too much information that buries the important issues. Information overload can be as damaging as information omission when it comes to misunderstanding and poor performance.

Likewise, the communication of intent is critical here. “Why” something is being done can be more important than exactly “what” is being done. Understanding intent can trigger a desire to want to expand one’s knowledge and actually learn more.

Communication is really enhanced when both parties are truly interested. Watch out for the major trap of assuming that sufficient knowledge is being transferred simply because the other party is not asking a lot of questions. Pay attention to what is conspicuously not being said. Initiate the questioning period if necessary.

Professional relationships are like all relationships—good communication is

important to long-term health. So, as you continue to make progress on all of your priorities, strive to improve your communication processes as well. This will be time well spent. ☺

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