

## New Year's Resolutions

As the New Year begins, it seems an appropriate time to be thinking about what you as a leader of your company could do to improve communication in your organisation.

I put the stress on what you can do, because although I run a communications consultancy and make a living out of advising people on how to communicate with their employees and their customers, it never ceases to amaze me how often business leaders complain about poor communication, but fail to do anything about it themselves.

For me communication is a key aspect of leadership. If your people don't know what your plans are for the future, don't understand why key projects really matter and don't as a result have a real sense of how they contribute to the success of your company, then the chances are that that success is at risk. And whilst communications professionals can advise on what your key messages should be and what channels you should use to deliver them, they aren't responsible for communication in a business – managers and directors are.

So what quick and easy New Year's resolutions should you be taking to improve communication in your company this year?

Well here are five top tips to help you on your way

1. **Agree the story** – as you start the year, sit down with the management team and summarise your company's strategy and key priorities for the year in no more than 5 short bullet points that tell a compelling story about your plans for 2008.
2. **Tell your people** – once you have agreed the story, go out and tell your people just what it is you are hoping to achieve and how they can contribute to success. Make them feel that they have a key part to play by linking their objectives very clearly to those of the company as a whole.
3. **Tell them again** – very few people pick up the story if you only tell them once and then never mention it again. Make sure that the story you have agreed is at the centre of all your communication throughout the year. Relate successes and failures back to it – for instance, if you have won new business then put it in the context of the story, 'We said at the start of the year that we would be looking for new business opportunities in eastern Europe to offset the declining markets in England and I am delighted to say ...'

4. **Be honest** – people are generally cynical about management pronouncements, believing that senior managers will try to convince them that all is well whether it is or not. Surprise them – be honest about setbacks, but up-beat about how you are going to get over them. So again as an example, ‘We said at the start of the year that we would be looking to source more of our materials from Asia this year in order to reduce our costs of production. Unfortunately rising transport costs have made this difficult to achieve. This is undoubtedly a setback to our plans but one that affects our competitors too. We are looking at alternative sources of materials nearer to home and will keep you posted.’
  
5. **Get out more** – interestingly employees generally treat company communication with a degree of suspicion, but invariably say that they trust their line manager. Why? Because they see them frequently, interact with them and have the opportunity to build a relationship with them. All too often senior managers and directors seem to hide behind email, issuing written pronouncements from on high, but never venturing onto the shop floor. Being visible really matters, so set yourself a goal of walking the floor from time to time and talking to people about the company and their part in its success. Sounds corny – but it works, because it is the way people communicate and interact in the real world.

And if you can only do one of these things? Then get out more. Make a conscious decision to use less email and instead pick up the phone or go and talk to people. It makes a difference.

*Richard Astle is Director of Athene Communications, a Peterborough based consultancy specialising in change and project communications.*