



What to say when there's nothing to say?

What to say when there's nothing to say is one of the most frequent challenges I am confronted with when advising clients on how to communicate with staff and how to improve levels of employee engagement.

All too often senior executives will point out that there is simply nothing they can tell staff at the moment: the future is too uncertain, there are several things that might happen which could change the direction of the company and it would be unwise to communicate anything. That would just confuse people. Far better, they feel, to sit on our hands, say nothing and avoid upsetting anyone.

This is particularly true of companies that are facing an uncertain corporate future: perhaps the directors are considering selling the business and are in discussions with another company or the market is so poor that job losses or even company closure are a possibility. For many directors, the fact that they don't themselves know what the future might bring makes it doubly hard to continue to communicate and engage honestly and openly with their staff. They fear that at best they will have to duck tricky questions like a politician on Newsnight or at worse will end up actually deceiving or misleading staff. In order to avoid awkward situations, directors don't just fail to communicate, they actively try to keep out of people's way.

This creates a problem for staff. For once directors stop talking to staff and remain hidden in their offices or are always "out at meetings", staff start to talk and draw their own conclusions. So instead of avoiding upsetting anyone, your silence has created rumour, speculation and concern for the future.

Which is a problem for the business. For organisations that are beset with rumour and speculation are rarely effective businesses. Results start to suffer. And if results suffer, your strategic options start to narrow anyway – no-one wants to buy or work with a poor-performing company.

So what is the solution? On the one hand the directors genuinely have nothing concrete to say. On the other, to say nothing is to invite rumour – nature, as they say, abhors a vacuum.

There is a way forward and that, as ever, is to be candid with your people, explain the strategic options you face, making clear that nothing is fixed or certain but asking them to concentrate on business as usual. In other words to focus communication away from corporate strategy and on to operational implementation.

And this does work. I recently advised a large company whose strategic direction was completely uncertain to do exactly this. Staff were told that the future of the business was unclear and that the directors themselves didn't know where the company would be a year from now. But they were reminded that in the meantime there was business that had to be delivered and that it was the job of everyone in the company to focus on delivering that business well. Roadshows were held at which junior members of staff presented examples of recent improvements in business process and show-

cased examples of excellent customer service. The mantra of the sessions was *'worry about the things we can influence'* with the point made that companies that deliver excellence throughout their operations are much more likely to have control over their future destinies than those that get distracted into blind allies around corporate strategy.

There is a lesson in here that goes beyond communication. Leaders of business need – and are paid - to look out for the future of their organisation. They should never, however, lose sight of the fact that the future is dependent on the successful delivery of the organisation's core business. Focus on that and you can't go far wrong.

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