



Communicating By Walking Around

Lance, a successful project manager of large engineering projects, writes only if he has good reason

HE CONSIDERS THE FOLLOWING TO BE GOOD REASONS: confirming understanding, articulating a complex issue, recording for future reference and covering (in some cases) his butt. Nor does he spend much time reading written reports. He believes that verbal communication is more effective than written. Lance claims that information gathering is the basis for all his other managerial work, which is the reason he chooses to spend so much of his time doing it.

He holds weekly two-hour status meetings with his team, composed of discipline leaders and major vendors' representatives. At these meetings, items being tracked week-to-week are monitored and new concerns are raised. The information exchange is not merely a show-and-tell; Lance wants to get the problems out in the open. He does not want to hear only good news. In fact, he says there would be no need for his job if there were only good things to report. Lance fosters an environment where there is no penalty for saying you are behind schedule or beyond budget. While it is safe to report trouble, it is unforgivable to withhold bad news.

Lance talks, at least weekly, to all major stakeholders, primarily on the telephone, but sometimes face-to-face. He does not simply transmit and receive information. Rather, he actively pushes and pulls information. He keeps these people informed of the project status, persuades them to support his team's decisions, negotiates for resources and finds out which of the company's other activities may affect his project. Lance also maintains an open-door policy, and he backs this up by being available every morning before 8:30. No appointments are scheduled then.

But Lance believes that he cannot just wait for information to come to him. He moves about and

exchanges information with the 60 engineers working on his project. After doing some homework on the technical aspects of each one's work, Lance gets on their playing fields by knowing something about their areas of expertise. This way, he can stop in on them and chat about their day-to-day work with credibility, obtain a true picture of how the project is going and at the same time let each individual feel that he or she is important because the project leader knows what he or she is doing. The fact that he spends at least a half hour daily talking with the engineers is outstanding, but even more so is that he listens. In his office hangs a poster that says,



“Listen. Let others talk.” Clearly, he believes it.

Beyond collecting and sharing information, Lance's communication style has two crucial byproducts. First, it motivates people. By talking and listening to the engineers on a one-to-one basis, Lance is able to enhance their commitment, loyalty, and esprit de corps. Second, it allows him a natural and subtle but timely influence on project activities. This informal, communicating-by-walking-around style is probably the most effective control system. •