

# Keep the 'Curse of Knowledge' from Hurting Employee Communications

*By Liz Guthridge*



**D**o you suffer from “the curse of knowledge?” Educators, authors and brothers Chip and Dan Heath coined this phrase for their 2007 book, *Made To Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. They define “curse of knowledge” as “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it.”

HR professionals who have become so steeped in technical HR skills have challenges explaining HR details to those outside of HR and, therefore, have the “curse of knowledge.” At least that’s the opinion of many employees and communication professionals. (Yes, a direct message with no sugar-coating from a communications professional who is sharing 10 simple steps you can immediately start to use to improve your communications.)

Employees may not say anything to your face, but they’re outspoken in other forums. For instance, in focus groups, social networking sites and in write-in comments on surveys – even when they’re not asked about HR communications – many employees take the opportunity to criticize the communications that HR develops.

Employees complain they can’t figure out what HR professionals are trying to tell them. The messages HR sends are too complex. Too convoluted. Too confusing. It’s seldom clear what employees should do with the information. Or why they should care. Or what the consequences are of doing nothing. (See table: *Common Comments about HR Communications*)

As for corporate communications professionals – those who work in HR and in other areas – they often grumble about HR on social media sites and in their professional associations, such as International Association of Business Communicator (IABC), Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Council of Communication Management (CCM). Many still talk about *Fast Company’s* August 2005 cover story, “Why We Hate

HR.” (The table summarizes the communication pros’ points of view.)

With this type of backlash, HR pros run the risk of losing credibility with colleagues. It’s not that we’re all dummies (although many of us would appreciate an *HR for Dummies* manual). It’s just that managers as well as other employees are pressed for time before they start to try to decipher HR communications. Plus, many in the workforce speak English as a second language, and have no time or interest in translating regulations or detailed HR rules.

So, it’s time to overcome your curse of knowledge so you can improve your communications. Another reason to improve your communications is the broader, more strategic agenda that HR now has and often shares with communications. For example, HR and communications often are jointly responsible for employee engagement, the employee experience, branding, leadership communications, change management, culture, and disaster planning and preparedness. (See Figure 1.) Meaningful communications with employees on these issues is much more than a logo, a tag line, a theme or a newsletter. All of these elements – plus what the organization needs to do about its business objectives – need to march in the same direction.

## COMMON COMMENTS ABOUT HR COMMUNICATIONS\*

From Employees, the Users	From Communication Staff Members
1. “It’s not written for me. I don’t know who they’re talking to, but it’s definitely not me.”	1. “Why do the messages have to have so much spin? Nobody wants or will believe all of this ‘happy talk.’ The messages need to be balanced.”
2. I can’t understand what they’re talking about. Why does it have to be so legalistic?”	2. “The messages are fragmented. There’s no common thread among all of them.”
3. “They don’t give me enough time to follow through and meet their deadlines.”	3. “The messages are missing context. The ‘why’ isn’t explained.”
4. “Why can’t I easily give feedback?”	4. “Why does HR include so much technical information plus emphasizing all of the exceptions and exclusions rather than highlighting the key points and advantages?”
5. “Why is it always so impersonal? I’d like to be able to follow up and ask a real human being if I have questions.”	5. “What does HR have against research? It would be helpful if we understood how people might react to a new program or policy or different way of communicating.”

\*Taken from recent employee surveys and social media forums.

Where Communications and HR Intersect



Figure 1.

We can advance these agendas further and faster if we work better together. While some healthy tension between HR and corporate communications is normal and productive, the turf wars that sometimes exist can be destructive to our working relationships and to the outcomes we want for our organizations. If we don’t make an effort to work together better and share our knowledge and skills, we will fail our customers – frontline employees to

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executives. And that bleeds to customers. Our customers, internal and external, could care less about our skirmishes; they just want good services, products and support for their business initiatives.

As a communications professional, I'm now actively advocating that we have to put aside our differences. Greater coordination and collaboration among HR and employee communications staff members will reap enormous benefits. For example, we can better match "say" and "do" messages to help leaders talk their walk. Through better and more coordinated planning, we can maximize the budget we spend on joint actions. We also can better synchronize calendars and scheduling that can simplify employees' lives. And we can work together for synergistic results.

### SIMPLE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS

- 1. Consider your stakeholders first.** Who are your stakeholders? What do you need them to do? What do they already know about this topic? To what extent do they have context about the topic? What do they think about the topic? How might they react? Do you anticipate any resistance? If so, do you expect rational, emotional or political reactions, or a combination? (Rational objections could be about the feasibility of the action, such as the timing, quality and steps or resources required. Emotional stems from individuals feeling how the change will personally affect them. Political resistance is about the fear of losing power or "face.") Present a balanced viewpoint with context, and acknowledge their possible concerns.
- 2. Use simple, everyday language.** For example, use "you" not "employee." "Service that counts toward eligibility for the 401(k) plan," not "credited service." "Pay" not "compensation." Stand up to the lawyers and forbid gobbledegook in your materials. It takes courage, and it isn't easy. But most leading-edge companies write regular communications in an easy-to-read manner, not as thick policy manuals. You can, too.
- 3. Organize your information in an easy-to-read manner.** Use numbered or bulleted lists, which are easier for people to remember. State up front if you expect your stakeholders to take any actions. If so, be explicit about what they need to do and the timing.
- 4. Link to the big picture.** Don't burrow in the weeds. Make the connection between your messages and the forest – specifically, how your messages fit into or align with your organization's strategy, goals and key initiatives.
- 5. Collaborate with a credible spokesperson.** Think through who the most credible person is on the topic you need to communicate. Who will people listen to? Who do they trust? Who will inspire them to act? Many times, these are supervisors and managers. So create tools, job aids and tip sheets for them to use.
- 6. Practice the nine I's.** Make sure your communications is balanced. Don't just inform people, which tends to be one-way communication. Use the eight other I's: interpret, inquire, involve, instruct, influence, inspire, interact and initiate. These other methods are more interactive, which not only engages people better but also spurs them to act.
- 7. Strive for good scores when you're writing.** After you write your first draft, run the readability statistics in your word processing software. With Microsoft Word, you should strive for:
  - Passive sentences: less than 20 percent
  - Flesch reading ease: 40 percent or more
  - Flesch-Kincaid grade level: 10.7 or lower (Newspapers and news
- Web sites write for the eighth grade. Lower is better, especially with front-line and hourly employees. You can simplify text and lower this measurement in many ways without talking down to people.)
- To put this into context, the readability stats for this article are 0 percent passive, 51.2 percent reading ease, and 9.4 grade level.
- 8. Test.** To ensure the content is clear and you've provided enough context, ask a few people to read and comment. These individuals should be members of your key stakeholder groups. (You may also want your fellow HR staff members and legal counsel to review too. Just don't count on the lawyers to help you with your document's readability.)
- 9. Be respectful of your colleagues' time.** Employees – especially managers – have big jobs even before they start to tackle the HR-related requests you make. Make it easy and simple for them to comply. After all, this is a productivity issue. Also, help them realize the benefits of the information you provide as well as the content of the programs and policies.
- 10. Spare the air.** HR communicators need to spare the air, too, especially when we're all pressed for time. This means economizing—being clear, concise and vivid while using a minimum of words. And only send out mission-critical information. So when in doubt, cut it out.

## HOW TO WORK WELL WITH COMMUNICATION PROS

What if you have access to corporate communications professionals who can help you with HR communications? Take these five actions:

1. **Start planning early.** Get your communications pro involved when you start planning your next complicated or expansive initiative, whatever it might be. The sooner you can work together to define the business problem you need to solve and then think through all the issues, including the impact and implications on the affected stakeholders, the better. You also can identify the key stakeholders, and start targeting important subgroups, such as HR field staff and managers with personalized messages.

Just as importantly, agree on how you want to work together so as you have a shared understanding as to your respective roles around communication content creation; the media you will use, and the editing process, including who has the final say. This way, you're better positioned to avoid misunderstandings along the way.

2. **Build research into the process.** Don't just assume you know what your stakeholders know and want. Ask them through focus groups or a survey. You can test key messages as well as preferred communication channels and media. Think about ways to make this an ever-green process, such as forming a rotating, annual 10- to 12-member employee/HR communication council.

3. **Coordinate your actions with other organization initiatives.** Work together to make sure you're staging the HR initiatives and communication at an opportune time so as not to conflict with other key events or to overburden others.

4. **Get leadership support and use it.** From a change management perspective, be sure to jointly arrange for leaders to get involved and show their interest and commitment. It is critical you find leaders who are on board with your mutual communications issues and that you involve them appropriately.

5. **Trust each other's expertise and play to your specific strengths.** Once you mutually agree on an approach, stick with it. Make tweaks to respond to research and any other changes, but don't spend time second-guessing each other. Give one another the benefit of the doubt and respect your professional expertise. For example, HR can focus on the accuracy of the content while the communication professionals can concentrate on how to communicate.

If you think like a time-pressed business person, rather than an HR expert, when you communicate with managers and employees, you'll be on your way to improving your employee communications.

As for my communication colleagues, I'm encouraging them to build stronger bridges by acting as a strategic business partner, not as an order-taker or a know-it-all about communications. In particular, I'm suggesting that we learn more about HR to be proficient and respected. We also need to form stronger personal relationships with HR partners so we can better understand their challenges.

We all need to be better business people, following lean principles and practices that benefit HR and communications simultaneously. This means adding value to our customers by leveraging resources, finding and eliminating waste, and striving for continuous improvements.

What actions can HR professionals take? The next time you communicate, try these 10 simple steps, which you can do on your own or with your communication colleagues. ■

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