Reprinted from

The magazine for motivated managers

MANAGEMENT REVIEW

The manager's memo as a strategic tool

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amacom A DIVISION OF AMERICAN MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATIONS

The manager's memo as a strategic tool

Irony, humor, and plain common sense—each has its place in various kinds of office memoranda. When the right communications strategy is matched with the appropriate situation, the memo becomes an instrument for managerial power.

MILDRED S. MYERS

COMPARE THE FOLLOWING two memos, the first from a manager to professional and technical staff members, the second from a technical employee to his manager. How do they differ?

TO: PAJ, Accountant
BLR, Engineer
CNV, Chemist

FROM: POE, Manager

RE: Our Meeting of October 4, 19--

I had the impression after our meeting that we were not pulling together as a team on developing the new information system. We all certainly have specific needs and professional objectives in tackling the job, but I had the uncomfortable feeling that we were all talking to ourselves, and not addressing or identifying the overall problems to be solved.

I would like to reiterate our broad objective: "To design a system that will satisfy the information needs of project management, plant management, accounting, and general management." I feel that most of these needs can be satisfied ... by an integrated system. This can only be achieved by planning the project together, working with a knowledge of the plan and each other's needs, and mutually evaluating the system.

When we meet next month, I expect that we would have identified the needs of each major component of the system, as follows:

Project Leader and Plant Needs--CNV
Research and General Management Needs--BLR
Accounting Needs--PAJ

We should articulate system needs clearly and simply; listen to each other's contributions and other constructive comments; and work together to lay out a work plan and schedule.

From the scientist:

TO: FDJ, Manager

FROM: VBG, Scientist

The run which is currently being finished at Plant Two has very bad edges. This has also been reported on other runs. Flakes and particles can be dislodged ... and carried into the polishing materials, where they will cause scratches on the surface of the finished product.

Since we are having this problem in the final product, we believe that more stringent measures should be taken to improve these edges. One method is to improve annealing and cutting. This may take some time. A quicker method to get improvement is to seam the edges. While the edges are not the whole problem, we believe that something must be done quickly to improve them.

These two memoranda differ in direction of the communication, purpose, and communication strategy. The first is from boss to subordinates; the second is from a technical employee to his boss. The first is intended to

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0025-1895/82/0006-0013$01.50/0

Manager's memo

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give direction to people, by reminding them of the project's overall organizational goals; the second analyzes a problem, in this case quality control, and suggests alternative solutions.

The writer of the first memo based his communication strategy (the methods used to achieve his purpose) on his position in the organizational hierarchy: he had the authority to tell people what to do. The writer of the second memo, addressing someone higher in the organizational hierarchy, based his communication strategy on the information he was presenting, allowing it to make the point, and leaving it to the manager to decide the appropriate alternative.

These two memos illustrate differences between managerial and professional or technical responsibilities in most organizations, differences that are reflected in the communication styles of the two groups. Managers who understand these differences and respond to them as managerial communicators may have greater success in discharging their duties than those who assume that the communication techniques they employed in their pre-managerial days are all they need.

One corporate executive says it is a manager's job "to make the right things happen and to stop wrong things from happening." To do this, it is as important for managers to direct people and to describe and clarify situations as it is for them to analyze or diagnose technical problems. The first memo shows that, while many people have the technical expertise to design the various parts of a system, it is the manager who moderates and directs their activities, to "make the right things happen." In this instance, as is necessary in many situations, the manager related individual goals and expertise to an overall organizational objective.

The memo as persuader

As shown in the first memo, a manager's purpose in communicating frequently is to persuade someone to do something or to express an intuitive reaction, rather than to transmit data. In other words, in managerial communication the focus may be on a person, or people, rather than on conveying specific information. Or, as one management consultant puts it: "The goal is shared values, but perhaps not shared information."

Another way to look at these differences is in the context of the communication process, which consists of three basic elements: a Sender, a Receiver, and, of course, the Message.

In most technical or professional communication, the focus is on the Message, on information or data. The Sender's purpose is to convey information to the Receiver(s), who may use the Message as part of a decision process. In many managerial communications, the focus is on the Receiver; the Sender's purpose is to get the Receiver(s) to act or to respond in a particular way. In fact, a study of one organization showed that managers produced written communication to persuade or otherwise influence a Receiver, rather than to transmit information, twice as often as did professional or technical staff.

When the intent is to influence a Receiver to act in a certain way, new information may or may not be presented as part of the persuasion process. Even when data is included, the information is presented in a context of encouraging the Receiver to respond to it in a particular way, because the Sender wants that response and is in a position to expect it:

TO: GLC, Engineer and Project Leader

FROM: FDL, Manager

I have just learned that the statistical counts ... have been allowed to deteriorate through our failure to provide the necessary data to Mr. N. This is directly contrary to our previously agreed upon procedure and is a serious shortcoming in the present project. I hereby request that you make up for lost time and apply the necessary data at once and in the future. If you cannot do this, please see me.

Mr. N. has this morning indicated again the great worth of developing a predictive model. If we had this model today, we would be in a better position to decide whether to run on Friday or to postpone until later. If we had proceeded with the statistical study, we would at least have had a chance to have this model.

Please proceed as quickly as possible.

Clearly, the Sender's purpose here is to light a fire under the Receiver; information included in the memo is there to intensify the chastisement, and motivate the engineer to act quickly.

Effects of authority and power

Because managers are in positions of authority, it is

especially important that they recognize the effect they can have on their Receivers, just because they are managers. This power can cause people to react to them in ways that have little or nothing to do with the facts of a situation. Staff usually respond from a desire not to look foolish; from a generalized distrust of management; or from the sense (often voiced by professional and technical personnel) that their managers don't want to know about difficult situations or to hear bad news about a project.

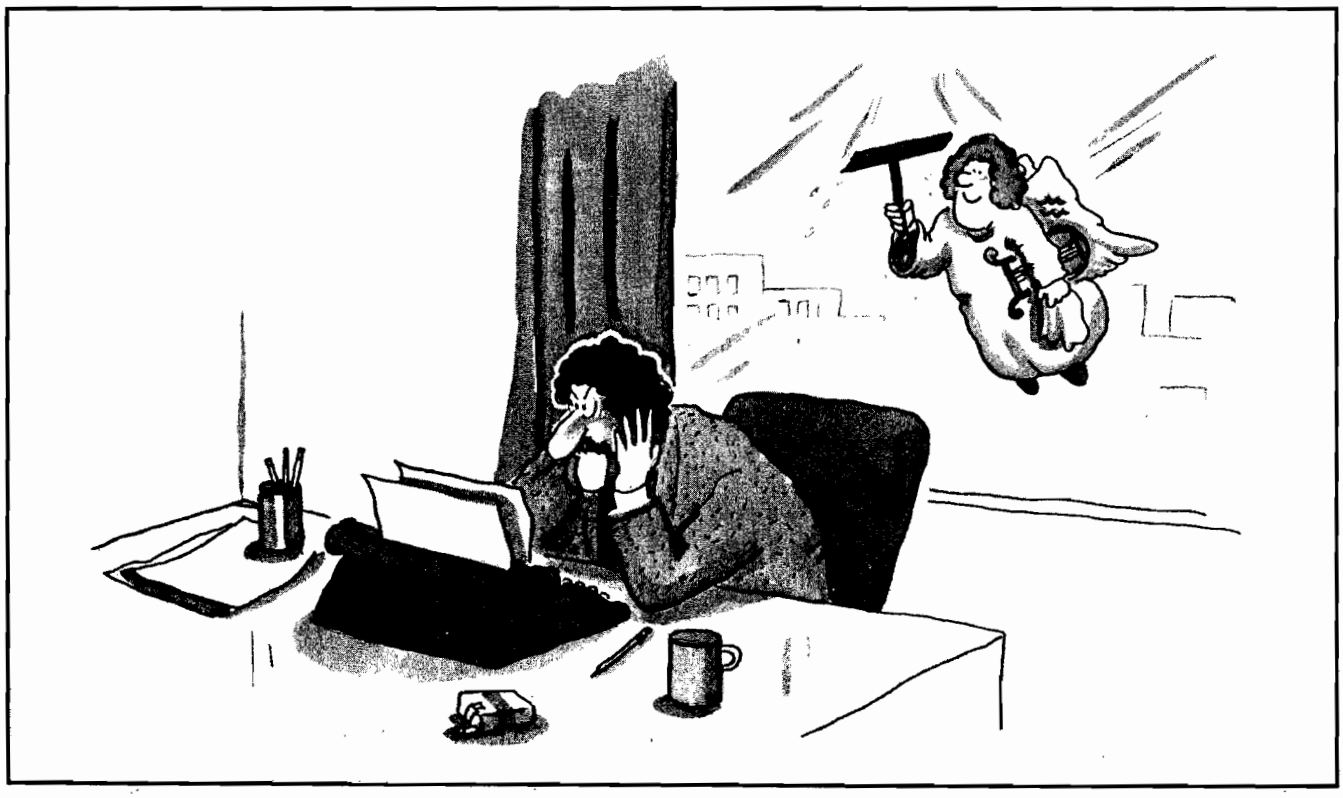
Staff members sometimes seem more aware than their managers that they are operating on different organizational levels, each with its own values. These levels, which may be visualized as a "three-layer cake," include a governing level (represented by the board of directors) that designs the organization's goals and monitors its performance; a middle, managerial level (composed of executives and managers) that governs day-to-day operations by making the necessary decisions; and a bottom layer (composed of professional, technical, and support staff) that carries out the day-to-day operations.

Because they are in the middle, managers have a pivotal role, requiring them to integrate individual needs, goals, and values of subordinates (who have a deep—but specific—point of view about their work) with overall goals of the organization (as set by top executives and directors, who generally have an organizational rather than a divisional or specialized viewpoint).

When managers fail to translate policies set by the top level into terms and situational examples that staff can relate to their own work, results can be dangerous. In one such case, a hospital business manager instructed Emergency Room (ER) staff not to admit non-emergency cases for treatment, after the hospital administrator had warned managers and department heads that if they didn't cut costs, he would find managers who could.

Because the business manager did not realize how literally the ER staff might interpret his casual, oral instructions, and because he did not translate the new cost-cutting policy into specific situations that might arise in the ER, a patient was refused treatment and died on her way to another hospital. Not all failures to translate policy set by the upper level into activities to be carried out by the lower level are so dramatic, but they can be costly to any organization.

In addition to implementing policies set by their bosses, managers need to coordinate work of their units with that of other units in the organization. Reminding their staff members of the necessary coordination, and



helping them to achieve it, is often an important managerial communication task:

TO: FKB, JIY, Engineers

FROM: ECH, Manager

In our conversations today, there seemed to be some confusion concerning who is to take the lead and be responsible for our recommendations concerning Project B. This recommendation will be based on the best inputs we can get from Manufacturing, New Products, other areas of Research, and our own modeling group....Therefore, I think it is consistent to reiterate that I want our recommendation to come from the Models area and specifically from Dr. F.

I will expect each of you to continue working closely with Dr. F. in this endeavor.

Just as their positions of authority make managers' chiding or instructional communications especially meaningful to their Receivers, so can their congratulations or thanks make a strong impression when things go well. The purpose of such communication is threefold: to express loyalty to the staff, to motivate future efforts by recognizing the one just completed, and—again mindful of the manager's "middle-layer" position—to link individual accomplishments to an overall organizational goal, as in this example:

TO: Personnel on Project B

FROM: CF, Manager

I had hoped to be able to visit the project site and personally express my thanks for the job you have been doing and to say Merry Christmas. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that I will be able to do so. Nevertheless, I want you to know that I do think of you, and I am following the progress of this work with great interest. I am sure that you realize that this is a very important project for ABC Company. Your participation, interest, and enthusiasm are very important to the success of this project. I appreciate all that you have done and look forward to continued contributions from you in 19--.

Merry Christmas.

As people move up from professional or technical to managerial positions, their communication strategies should change as well. Most of us learned to structure arguments based on logic and reason, to rationalize with our readers or listeners by presenting facts and figures. These communication strategies are, of course, valid, for many managerial communication situations.

However, because managers and executives address about 40 percent of their communication to subordinates, their strategies may be based on qualities other than logic at times. As John Fielden, a former editor of *Harvard Business Review*, put it in "What Do You Mean I Can't Write?" (a 1964 *HBR* article which is still relevant today), "There is an obvious difference between the type of communication that a boss writes to his subordinate and the type that the subordinate can get away with when he writes to his boss."

Humorous and emotional appeals

A recent study showed that, in over 25 percent of documents generated by managers and executives, what they said or requested was so, because they said it or asked it—not because they presented a logical argument. Professional or technical personnel obviously cannot use this style, and most managers would agree that they cannot always depend on authority to make a case for them. However, sometimes an authoritarian approach can produce action, or end an impasse, when logic and reason have failed. If it can be used whimsically, or with humor, as in the following example, all the better.

TO: JPA, Manager

FROM: ERD, Vice-President

Once upon a time a vice-president was asked to buy a computer, convinced by his staff of its value and all the "good things" it would do for his organization. Some considerable time later, this vice-president tried to find out more about the "good things" the computer was doing for his organization. He tried mightily to learn how it was being used. Unfortunately, all he was ever told were new ways to make his computer bigger and better.

This poor vice-president could not tell if his computer experts did not know what the computer was being used for, or knew and were embarrassed to tell him. So he came to the following conclusions. If they did not know, they should find out and tell him. If they did know, and were embarrassed to tell him, why the need to upgrade? The perplexed vice-president decided he did not want to talk any more about improvements to his computer until he found what the computer was doing for his organization. Is it time to have a special meeting to review the utilization of the computer, to help out this poor, confused vice-president?

Shrewd managerial communicators know that there are times when emotional rather than logical appeals are called for to get action. Fielden refers to these kinds of appeals as persuasion by "enthusiasm," or, if appropriate, "by hitting with the blunt edge of the ax," as in this memo written by a manager to his boss:

TO: EFD, Vice President

FROM: FDL, Manager

You should, I recommend, stomp on (this situation) with both feet. I am not (and have not been) in charge of this work, but I have watched the situation closely. We (Plant One) have dropped the ball; Division C doesn't know which team they're playing for. Let's go!

No data here, but strong feeling is expressed by the manager in a sports analogy emphasizing need for assertiveness to control the situation. It is unlikely that a professional or technical employee would send such a memo to a boss. There would be sound organizational and political reasons not to; but, in addition, professional values of most technical or professional employees predispose them to base communication strategies on verifiable data rather than on team spirit. Compare the last memo with this first sentence of a memo from an engineer to his manager:

In response to your recent oral request, I submit the following observations as candidates for the justification needed to approve the conduct of a test using the ... system.

The memo lists and discusses a series of tests, or observations, that had been made. So careful was this writer to base his recommendation on data and fact that he submitted his scientific *observations* as "candidates" for justification. But he left it to someone else to actually come to the conclusion that the test was, in fact, justifiable.

This careful, data-dictated communication is very different from the following note, written by a vice-president to the senior vice-president to whom he reported:

I hear through the grapevine that Project B is not to have the services of the XYZ-2 computer. I would like the opportunity to present the advantages of using the XYZ-2 for the Project B experiment and to have this utilization compared with what is planned at Plant C.

I sincerely believe that you will be giving up something for nothing if you send the XYZ-2 to Plant C. May I have your approval to schedule a meeting to review the pros and cons of Project B versus Plant C, with respect to the utilization of the XYZ-2?

The vice-president who sent this memo got his meeting and, as a result, his computer. He claims that, if he had argued directly and logically in the memo, without giving his boss time to rethink the situation, he would have lost. It would have appeared that the vice-president was suggesting that he could out-think the boss, even before hearing the boss's reasons. As Fielden puts it, the vice-president displayed "a fine sense of discretion, of hinting but not stating overtly things which are impolitic to mention." After considering the memo, and the situation, the senior officer came to the meeting and stated that he had changed his mind, saving himself from being instructed publicly by his subordinate.

Differences in the hierarchy, differences in role values at various levels can lead to communication conflicts and to failure, because the Sender of a Message fails to think about how the Receiver may react, given his or her layer in the organizational cake. For example, one vice-president of research and development talks of spending days arguing with his staff about the wording of their proposals for next year's research portfolio. Technical people describe the scientific value of these projects; the vice-president must justify costs to directors who want to know whether and how projects will yield a profit.

The vice-president says, "If they give me what I want, they can have what they want." If projects are described so that they appeal to those who have budget approval, they will be funded, and the technical staff can implement them. The middle manager must translate plans and activities of one group into terms that meet the goals and objectives of the other. Managers who can construct communication strategies that make full, effective use of their pivotal positions in an organization are several steps ahead of those who "let the facts speak for themselves."

"Tell them not to be mail carriers," said one executive, when asked what communication advice he would give to new or potential managers. He explained that "delivering the mail," just providing the relevant information, is not enough to insure that the manager will "make the right things happen and stop the wrong things from happening."

In the words of another manager, he and his colleagues have to "take a global view of the organization," while encouraging their subordinates to have professional and personal pride in the responsibilities of their own units. Since so many managerial responsibilities involve care for someone's ego and professional pride, whether that someone is subordinate or supervisor, communication skills that make full use of a manager's position, while simultaneously considering the needs of the Receiver, are particularly valuable.

Recognizing the importance of effective communication to his organization, a manager sent a memo to one of his staff about a particular problem. His memo ended:

> I know that communication is always a problem among people, and especially busy people as we all are. However, I would hope that you and he can repair any disconnected circuits between you, so that management above me can be informed in a lucid and accurate manner.

This manager knew a valuable rule: We can hope that people will accept, understand, and work out the differences that sometimes separate them. But the burden is on the manager—the person who must integrate the functions of the upper and lower layers of the cake—to communicate in ways that "make the right things happen." •

"Remember, Stoddard, around here you're only as good as your last memo."