

Globe Careers

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EXECUTIVE SKILLS

Conduct yourself as a communications leader

It's time to leave the comfort of the corner office and emerge a better communicator.

ALEXANDRA EDMISTON offers strategies

We've all worked for leaders who hole themselves up in their plush executive suites and communicate to the rank and file exclusively through their direct reports. They're a familiar image in the company newsletter, but you'll rarely find them checking out the daily specials in the cafeteria.

Many of us have accepted this is the way our leaders communicate. But it is not the style favoured by top leaders, who understand that powerful communications skills are not a warm-and-fuzzy evil but vital to their success.

Regular, effective communication from the top can enhance employee pride, offer inspiration and directly correlates to employee satisfaction and retention.

When U.S. journal CIO Insight asked in a 2003 on-line survey what skills define a strong leader, 65 per cent of the 792 information technology senior executives who responded cited effective communication skills — the top choice.

So, how do you venture out of the comfort of the executive suite and emerge a better communicator?

Put communication at the top of your agenda

Any organization-wide initiative that you're leading should always include a solid communications plan that clearly outlines how you'll explain your strategy to employees

in a way that is meaningful to them. No matter what is happening at a company, employees want to know what's in it for them. A strong leader tells them.

The best leaders communicate directly to their audience. Resist the urge to delegate a communication opportunity from your comfy chair.

Tap your in-house communications expertise

Many large organizations now have a corporate communications department that provides counsel to management.

The savviest leaders insist on having a communications expert assigned to their division to ensure all communication circulated to employees is effective and its impact on the organization is measured.

Get your message to the right people

Every organization has a myriad of communications tools designed to keep in touch with all employees. Whether it's the company newsletter, the intranet, a regular e-mail update or regular employees meetings, these channels are available to you.

Many corporate leaders have a personal newsletter designed to share information in a friendly, candid and informative way. Many leaders are sold on the proven value of face-to-face communication.

Some enjoy getting together regularly with small groups of employees to share ideas over breakfast. Others eat in the cafeteria everyday to ask for feedback and gauge employee morale.

Learn how to use the tools available to you effectively to develop a relationship and spread your messages to employees.

Remember the cardinal rule of effective communication: Know your audience and carefully tailor your message to their needs. Ask for

feedback on how employees want to receive information from you.

Ask how you're doing

When you're the leader, with the power to hire and fire, rare are the brave souls willing to tell you how you're doing. No one will volunteer that your speech was peppered with annoying "ums" and "likes" or that you make everyone dizzy when you bob around nervously when speaking to large audiences. But everyone else will notice and com-

ment to one another afterward.

So be brave. Ask someone you trust to critique your written and verbal communication style. The truth may sting at first but the feedback you receive will more than make up for your bruised ego.

Seek feedback

All employees play a key role in your organization and, without their support, any strategy is at risk of failure. Asking for their feedback is essential to emphasizing the im-

portance of their role.

You don't have to act on every opinion, but at least you'll have an idea of what employees at every level are thinking. And, always follow up to acknowledge they're a part of the team with welcomed opinions.

Cast your net beyond the company walls

You probably cringed the last time you saw a competitor acting as the expert in the media, commenting on their organization and your industry. If you're a leader in your industry, why didn't they call on you?

If you have something worthy to say, the media want to hear from you. But they must know you exist.

In the wake of the recent business and government scandals, the public wants to hear from trusted leaders. So be proactive and work with your communications expert to develop a media relations plan designed to obtain regular exposure to enhance your external image. This will also enhance your internal image because your employees will be watching or reading about you and brimming with pride.

Make communication your competitive advantage

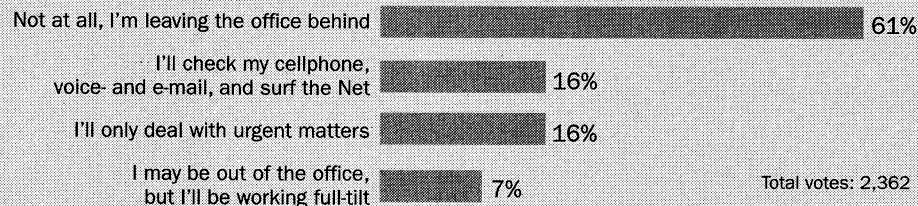
When you're ready to take on the next opportunity — whether it's at your current organization or in a brand-new job — use strong communication skills to set you apart from the pack as a leader.

Alexandra Edmiston is a principal in a Toronto media-relations firm and volunteer president of the Toronto chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators.

The weekly web poll

LAST WEEK'S QUESTION:

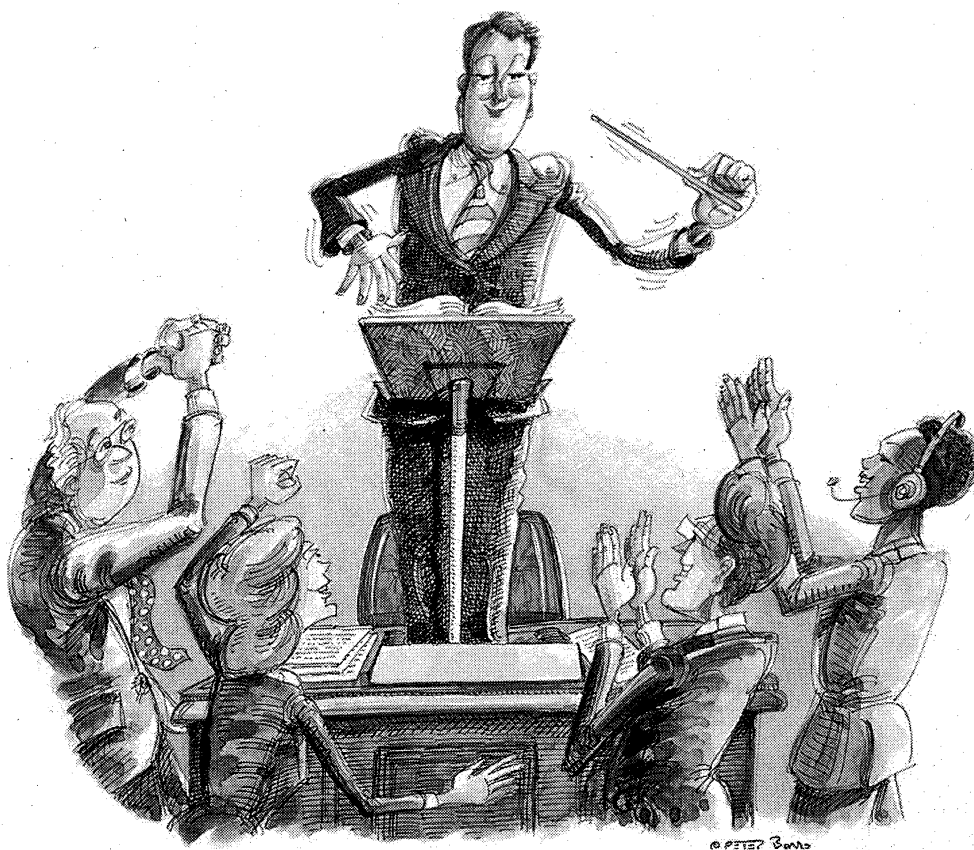
How much will you work on your summer vacation?



THIS WEEK'S QUESTION:

What's the worst lie you've told at work?

Vote at globeandmail.com/business



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