



Don't get swept away by poor performance

Learn to communicate your expectations and watch your staff clean up!

By Tim Smith, Principal

A client of mine used to go through housekeepers at the rate of about one every six months.

She would hire a new housekeeper, be happy for awhile, and then realize that her expectations were not being met. It was all downhill from there until another one would bite the dust. (That's a housekeeping joke.)

Then the process would start all over.

A few years ago at lunch, she was describing her problem. I suggested that she make a room-by-room list of expectations and pet peeves. "Share that list with your housekeeper, and you'll see most of your housekeeping problems go away," I said.

She did. It worked. And I didn't even send her an invoice! (That's a consulting joke.)

It seems so simple, but it's one of the most misunderstood aspects of managing people – you have to tell them what you want, in a way they can understand.

In fact, I often explain to clients that they can start to solve most business problems by answering two questions:

- What do you want?
- How are we doing?

In this issue, we're going to look at the first question – what do you want? – in more detail. Then, with our next newsletter in May, we'll address the second.

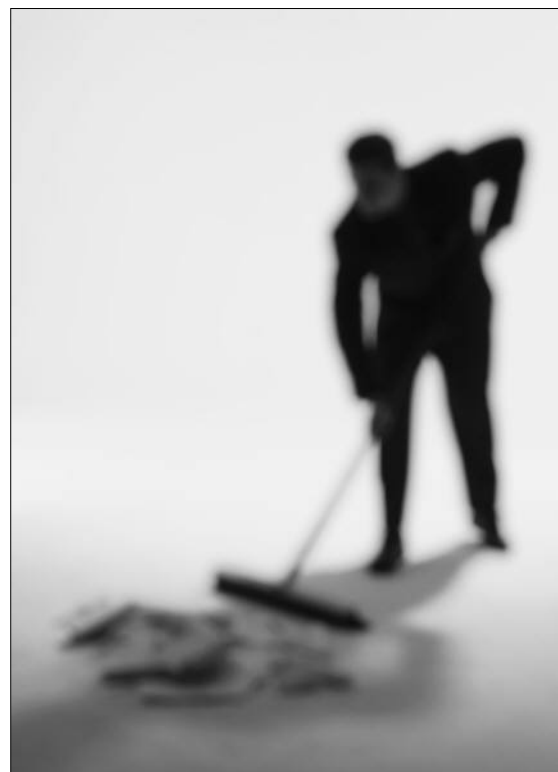
Most of us need help communicating

Communicating your expectations clearly is a skill that everyone can learn.

Sure, some folks are born with the ability to deliver a crisp vision and clear directions that everyone can immediately grasp, but those folks are few and far between.

Most of us need some help from time to time.

One reason is that we often assume others know what to do, or what we want from them.



Establish clear direction and you will sweep up profits, not problems.

This is especially true in professional settings, where we are surrounded by skilled, knowledgeable staff. But of course, unless you work with psychics, no one can read your mind.

So, how do you communicate what you want so that others can work toward that result and know whether they're on track?

When delegating to a person – that is, transferring responsibility for a function or task to someone else such that they fulfill that obligation to your satisfaction – you might use a job description, procedure documentation, work instructions or other formal communication.

Delegating work to a task force or cross-functional project team? Maybe you use a team charter to define the purpose of the effort, the goal, participants and their roles, budget, other available resources, sponsor, interim and final milestone dates, etc.

Seeking a particular process outcome? You might use something more quantitative, more goal-like: a balanced set of performance metrics.

Want to get the whole company focused on the performance of the enterprise? Then you'll need a strategic plan, a mission and/or vision statement, time-specific goals – i.e., “\$10 million in product revenue by December 2008!” – and ongoing, follow-up communication as reinforcement.

Regardless of the written tool, the point is to communicate your picture clearly. In the March 2006 newsletter regarding business process performance, we talked about completing the following sentence:

“We'll know the process is working well if [criterion 1], and [criterion 2] and [criterion 3] and ...”

That's often a handy way to begin describing your expectations: “I'll know things are going well if ...”.

One pitfall to look out for – these written tools (e.g. job descriptions, project plans, goal statements) often take on the aspect of “form over substance.” That is, people forget that the intent of each document is to communicate critical, non-routine or complex information.

So they focus only on “filling in the blanks,” not on delivering worthwhile content. Make sure you don't allow your team to backslide when using delegating tools.

Feedback yields clarity

But don't just put it in writing. Review with others your written description and solicit feedback. Ask them to tell you in their own words what they heard you say.

Why spend the time to put your description in writing **and** discuss it with the party to whom you're delegating?

Putting your thoughts on paper helps you gain greater

clarity about what you want. It also establishes a resource that others can refer to later.

When it comes to spoken communication, studies have shown that one of the best ways to communicate non-routine and complex messages is to discuss them, in person if possible. That gives you the opportunity to ensure that others interpret what you've written the way you intended. Without the feedback, you are left assuming that other people understand what you meant.

That's a dangerous assumption.

Give your staff a yardstick

So, you know exactly what you want. But are you getting it?

If not, perhaps you believe that careful communication takes too much effort – that it's not worth the time. Or perhaps you're thinking, “Hey, my team is experienced. They know what they're doing. I don't need to tell them.”

Or maybe you feel you've already communicated what you want, when in fact you've only given a vague description that's trickled out over time in bits and pieces.

Perhaps you have clearly described what you want, but haven't mentioned it again. Or you've also expressed other goals ... and staff members don't know which goals are most important to you.

Then again, others may have simply misinterpreted what you said and they don't truly understand what your expectations are.

By clearly communicating what you want – especially if you define what you want in specific, measurable terms – you essentially delineate the lowest level of performance you'll accept. That level of performance is your *standard*. It is the yardstick against which you'll compare actual results.

Give your staff a yardstick to measure themselves and they'll achieve great things. Like my client and her housekeeper, still neat and tidy after all these years.

Next issue: The benefits of asking “how are we doing?”

More Information? If you'd like to learn more about communicating your expectations, please send an E-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our web site at www.plaidgroup.com, or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp.

Author's Note: Tim Smith is a Principal with The Plaid Group. The Plaid Group helps companies simplify and stabilize their business operations to improve financial performance and gain a competitive edge.