

# Three Things Wrong With Our Profession — *And What We Can Do About Them*

by Dennis R. Ackley

**T**he Three Problems Are:

1. We claim to do what everyone claims to do.
2. We spend most of our time informing employees about things they already know.
3. We do what senior management of most organizations wants someone else to do.

With these problems, it's little wonder why people in our profession often say they feel like second-class citizens.

## ***We Do What They Do***

The word "communicator" appears on the business cards or in the job descriptions of everyone in our profession. But anyone who utters sounds, writes words, or uses body language to send messages can claim to be a "communicator."

Sure, we're better than most people at doing what everyone does. Yet, there are some terrific communicators who do not have the title "communicator." These people can be found in jobs throughout organizations—even the top job.

At best, the title communicator is content free. It fails to tell people what we do that they don't do. Firefighters fight fires. Managers manage. What do communicators do—communicate? So does everybody else.

Even my mother asks every so often, "Now just once more, what is it you do?" It's painfully clear to me that Mom doesn't want to tell her friends that her son does what everyone else does.

## ***We Tell Them What They Already Know***

In addition to practicing a craft that has little perceived value, we add to our plight by claiming to be the bearers of new information. But we all know that in far too many cases, we are telling employees what they already know.

I'm talking about the myth that we communicate *news*.

"News" is generally defined as information not previously known. News is what's printed on the paper that's tossed in your driveway each morning. News is what's on TV right before you fall asleep each night. How many stories are in your publication that have already been scooped by the grapevine, real news outlets, or even face-to-face communication?

***"All of us in the employee communication profession face three critical problems. These problems may be serious enough to change what we do—even what we're called."***

## *Three Things Wrong With Our Profession*

Too many of us in our profession have been unpleasantly surprised by the results of communication studies indicating that our communication materials have less than 100 percent credibility with employees. Maybe that's because employees know the information isn't *news* even though we tell them it is—often in large type on the publication's masthead. And even if we don't call the publication something like the "XYZ Company News," we often design it to look like a source of news and write the stories to sound like news.

Old "news" that employees have already heard gets labeled as propaganda—a nasty curse employees can put on corporate publications.

Real and credible news about the organization is distributed in a timely manner by e-mail, fax, telephone hookups, teleconferences, or coordinated announcement meetings.

### ***We Do What Senior Management Wants Someone Else to Do***

If you take me too seriously, you may believe I've implied that communication professionals are worthless liars. If this is the case, it probably won't make you think any less of me if I tell you the top boss of your organization wants to give your job to somebody else.

Management wants its "own people" to do your job. Management wants other members of management—mostly supervisors—to tell employees what they need to do to help the organization succeed. And that's what many employees want to hear—and usually from their supervisors.

A lot of time and money is being spent on communication training programs for supervisors. Job descriptions are being modified to list work-related communication as one of the essential components of the supervisor's job. Performance appraisal forms are being rewritten to ask employees to evaluate the effectiveness of their supervisors'

communication skills. It's not boom time in middle management. Staff jobs are getting rarer.

Consider this—how many organizations have a "performance appraisal department." You won't find many because that function is considered part of each supervisor's job. So what's going to happen to the "employee communication department" as senior management pushes that function to supervisors? Should we wait and see—or should we take action? Like nearly every other job today—ours must change.

### ***Possible Solution #1—Don't Claim to Do What Everyone Else Does!***

*Lay claim to what needs to be done—and do it well.*

Let's take a lesson from our colleagues in the Human Resources department—remember when it was called "Personnel?" They changed the name of what they do to reflect management's view of their function better. So can we.

In the strictest sense of the word, we are not communicators. Communication requires two-way exchange to make sure the message sent was received in the way it was intended. It is fairly rare for us to be involved in a two-way exchange. We know it is an essential element in communication. But too often we are not in a position to receive direct verbal or non-verbal feedback from our audience. We make valiant attempts through surveys, open forums, and "talk back to the editor" sections in company publications. But we are not face-to-face with our audience. Supervisors are. So they really have a better case for being the organization's employee communicators.

Rather than argue with senior management about who should be responsible for employee communication, let's change the focus of what we do. Let's demonstrate to senior management that we have a critical role to play in:

- Making supervisors better employee communicators.
- Transmitting information to all employees that will reinforce and clarify the overall corporate mission and values.
- Assessing how well the messages are being heard, understood, and put into practice.
- Strengthening the organization's financial health by sending employees information that helps them become more effective in either making or saving money for the organization.

These tasks are vital to the success of the organization. And these are tasks we already are doing—or should be doing.

What should we call people who do these tasks? Should we change the name of the function to “Corporate Information Resources?”—*a la* Human Resources? Should we become more closely linked to the role of supporting the corporate mission? (No, I would not suggest the title “Corporate Missionary.”) I think my mother would feel better saying to one of her friends, “Oh, how nice your daughter is a brain surgeon. My son is a Corporate Information Liaison Officer.” At least it won't sound like I do what everyone else has been able to do since childhood.

Undoubtedly, with all the intellectual horsepower in our profession, we can come up with a new name for our profession. Maybe we should ask IABC to conduct a contest—or start with a new name for IABC? Change is all around us—we should change, too.

### ***Possible Solution #2—Don't Tell Employees What They Already Know***

*Spend time informing employees how well the organization is succeeding, how new techniques are strengthening the organization's financial health, and how the organization is benefiting from the never-ending process of quality improvement.*

Stop using the four-letter word that starts with “N.” Rename the information you transmit to supervisors and employees via print or recorded electronic media. To reinforce our newly named role, we should give our publications and other information vehicles titles such as “The XYZ Mission Tracker,” “Profiles of ABC Company Achievers,” or “Information for Quality-Oriented Employees.”

No, these aren't as succinct as the “Widget, Inc. News.” But we need to use names that reflect the content and purpose of the information we are sending. By using a name that reinforces what management wants employees to hear—and what employees want to know—we can enhance our role in the organization.

### ***Possible Solution #3 — Don't Do What Senior Management Wants Someone Else to Do***

*Help the people whom management wants to be the communicators do their jobs better, and let us earn a more strategic role in the organization.*

Because we are good communicators, we can use our skills to help supervisors become effective employee communicators. We can do this by providing supervisors with timely information so that they are credible when they share it with employees. Also, we can conduct training programs to teach supervisors how to be effective company communicators with employees.

## *Three Things Wrong With Our Profession*

We can find ways to be leaders in the organization by demonstrating the proper communication techniques. We can lead the effort to clarify and explain the company mission. We can find examples within the organization of where the mission is being effectively put into practice—where quality is becoming the driving force in enhancing customer satisfaction. And we can report these accomplishments—and even the lessons of failures—to employees.

If we get really good at doing all this, perhaps we will earn management's respect for the skills we bring to the organization. When we earn that recognition, we may find ourselves doing what our training and skills suit us to do—becoming part of management's strategy team. As strategic planners, we can create business information and communication techniques that support the ever-evolving vision of corporate success.

We face three critical problems. If we work hard and follow the example of some of our innovative colleagues, we can turn these problems into reasons to change and improve our profession—as well as increase the value we add to our organizations.



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Dennis Ackley is a nationally recognized leader in benefit communication and retirement education. His innovative, award-winning communication programs have reached more than three million employees on topics such as retirement planning, investing, health care, benefit choices, pay, and incentive plans. Dennis has created communication campaigns for hundreds of the country's largest employers. He has written more than four dozen articles for such publications as *HR Magazine*, *Benefits Quarterly*, *Employee Benefits News*, and *Communication World*. He is a featured speaker at scores of conferences including the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, Profit Sharing/401(k) Council, the PBGC, The Conference Board, Pensions & Investments, and Benefits Management Forum and Expo.

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