

What if... Organizational Communication Scores are Low?

Probably the most common concern for shelters is communication. Breakdowns can occur at multiple points throughout the communication pipeline, from top-down (communication from those in charge or “at the top” to those in general staff positions) to bottom-up (communication from subordinates and general staff employees up to supervisors and leadership), and horizontally (communication across departments or among employees and leaders working at the same levels within an organization).

If you’re looking to improve **top-down and bottom-up organizational communication** (e.g. between leadership and staff), try these best practices:

Start here:

- “**Step Zero**” should always be to form a committee including employees from all areas of the organization. Your own employees can generate organization-specific best practices for improving communication. The committee should be tasked with identifying strategies for improvement in form, frequency, function, and focus of communication. Set a goal of **5-10 ideas** to address communication issues.
 - Forming a committee has the added benefit of reinforcing leadership’s commitment to communication and employee involvement.
 - Celebrate your employees on the committee and show thanks; consider providing lunch
 - Try to implement as many ideas as possible. Make it clear what changes can be made immediately versus those that will need to wait and those that are not feasible to change (be sure to explain WHY these changes cannot be made or cannot be instituted immediately).

What else can you do?

- If there is a single word or lesson that could improve communication, that would be “**transparency**”—always be open, honest, clear, and direct with your employees about what you are doing and why you are doing it
- Think of communication as a “*two-way*” process rather than a “*one-way*” process—take a moment to do a pulse-check to make sure you and your staff are on the same page with important or complex messages.
 - Your messages will be interpreted and internalized and shared among employees—communication is more than sending a message, it is also how that message is received and interpreted
 - Check in with employees to see what they are thinking about
 - Consider appointing an “ambassador” or “liaison” to keep leadership up-to-date with how employees are understanding and handling communication
 - Adjust your messaging accordingly: ambiguity can be powerful when used appropriately, but frustrating when used too frequently
 - If necessary, consider having affected employees summarize what they have understood and work with them to achieve mutual understanding

- Think about how employees can voice their concerns, questions, and ideas (“bottom-up” communication), whether this means providing an open forum, discussion time during meetings, or a suggestion box – or all three
 - Bottom line: employees need to have a voice, and more important, feel like they have a voice in the organization to feel satisfied with communication
 - As a supplement or alternative to a traditional suggestion box, try a “Question Box” (either physical or virtual) that allows employees at all levels to submit anonymous questions
 - Try an “Ask me/Tell me” program in which managers actively approach employees to ask about their informational needs
 - Again, rather than waiting for employees to approach leadership with questions and issues, this tactic demonstrates that leadership is invested in employee concerns and experiences
 - If need be, have managers allocate time in their schedules for “Ask me/Tell me” until it becomes routine
 - Regardless of how you solicit questions, suggestions, and feedback from your employees, provide a prompt turnaround (e.g. within 36 hours), and *take all responses seriously*
 - Meetings may be a great opportunity to address questions and comments; alternatively, questions and their answers can be posted on a bulletin board or other highly visible location
- Think about how your employees prefer to send and receive messages
 - The frequency, form, type, etc. of messages is communication in and of itself—*avoid overloading your employees with frequent messages*
 - Frequent email updates, especially for lower priority messages, can be burdensome on already-busy employees.
 - Consider collecting lower-priority and non-time-sensitive messages into weekly (or as-needed) newsletters or similar updates
 - Other important, but not time-sensitive announcements can be reserved for meetings
 - However, it is important to ensure that messages are received by your employees
 - This means sending critical messages across multiple channels (e.g. having managers make an announcement in addition to including the message in a weekly email update) and even at multiple times—especially if you employ a number of part-time or other workers with shifting schedules
 - Big organizational changes or initiatives may be best communicated in a meeting or open forum with plenty of opportunities to ask questions and demystify the change
- Employees may view meetings as the primary medium for organizational communication, so leverage meetings to your communication advantage using these tips:
 - **Prepare a meeting agenda ahead of the meeting and distribute it to attendees**
 - Allow attendees to provide feedback and additional suggested items
 - Start each meeting with the most critical items
 - Start meetings on time, and stick to the allotted time

- You may need to assign time limits to individual agenda items to avoid tangential discussions and overlong meetings
- Create rules and structures for the meetings so that attendees know the appropriate form of participation
 - For example, decide in advance if side conversations are allowed
- Make meetings regularly scheduled so they don't appear as surprises to employees
 - Don't be afraid to cancel meetings if there are insufficient discussion items
 - If a meeting needs to be rescheduled or held impromptu, give as much notice as possible to limit disruption to employee work flow
- Allow employees to opt-out of meetings if their presence is not necessary—for example, cleaning staff may not need to be present for meetings discussing a new adoption policy
- Keep meetings fresh by varying locations—even if this means getting out of the office on occasion
 - You can also break up meeting attendees into small problem-solving groups
- Don't forget to ask for feedback and suggestions for improvement on the meetings themselves, and make adjustments as-needed

Got it. Now what?

- Clearly define your organization's mission and make it known to your employees
 - This means explaining how their actions, roles, and responsibilities relate to strategic goals and the overall mission
 - This also means providing updates on progress toward those strategic goals
- Arrange informal time with managers and other leadership
 - Employees may be nervous about approaching leadership or concerned with interrupting a busy supervisor, so encouraging managers to take time for casual concerns can help employees feel more comfortable bringing up concerns, questions, and ideas
- Finally, identify managers who need general communication skills development and work with them to improve
 - Provide a mentor/coach to provide advice and support in managing communication style
 - Invest in a general leadership or management training program—continuing education programs associated with universities often offer such courses
 - *Even trained managers need the occasional refresher training as habits sink in*
 - Encourage managers to provide regular feedback—both positive and negative (when constructive) feedback to employees to make regular communication a good habit