

Who's In?

To Fuel Commitment, Communicate Relentlessly

By Jude David Rake



You might be surprised by how many people aren't "in". That's because many employees in a lot of companies operate in the dark. Their leaders mean well, but they often focus most of their attention behind closed doors with key stakeholders and teammates dealing with urgent matters. This leaves little time for open, candid communications that reaches the entire workforce with the clarity, consistency and the repetition required to fully engage people in the initiatives that are critical to the future prosperity of their company.

Leadership Principle #6

Communicate relentlessly to give people the context they need to be "all-in".

The Leader's Challenge

Renovating a culture requires people to change their behavior. To change their behavior, people must be engaged and committed. Commitment requires a thorough understanding of why change is necessary, and that understanding hinges on persuasive communication from leaders at all levels of the organization.

Most leaders want the change they desire for their organization to happen like a light switch. They are action and results oriented. That's how they achieved their leadership role. They are motivated to change and they're ready to flip the switch. Unfortunately, workforce reality is more like a journey than a light switch. Many workers aren't compelled yet. Of course some people are ready to sign up and go. They are the difference-makers that leaders must champion by catching them doing something well, publicly and often, to reveal success models to their entire workforce. For more about this aspect of leadership, please see principles #1 and #9.

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New ideas are the natural born enemies of the way things are, and for many people, the way things are today is simply more appealing than the way they might be in a future, unknown state their leader espouses as The Promised Land. People don't fear change. They fear loss. Many change initiatives threaten their competence, relationships, territory, security, sense of direction, and in some cases, their livelihood. What can possibly be so important that requires embracing this kind of potential loss? Why change? They need rational and compelling context.

The leader might think they have communicated an important message because they said it once or even a few times in key meetings and publicly to their entire organization. But it has been proven that many people need to hear a message at least 7 times for it to sink in. That message also must persuasively answer the questions every employee will be asking; what does all this mean for me, and how can I personally help us win?

If you ask leaders how well they communicate with their workforce, most will tell you that it's a top priority and they do it pretty well. Most leaders conduct regular communications meetings where they share goals and results, and they have other mechanisms for connecting with the people they lead. But their perception is often not reality through the eyes of their workforce. Leaders must have empathy to appreciate what their people need from them to fully commit to changing their behavior. The old command-and-control days of "you should do this because I say so" and "you should be happy to have a job" are gone. People want more. But too often leaders deliver messages crafted through their own lens rather than the perspective of the people they wish to inspire toward improved performance.

In his book *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*, Patrick Lencioni hits the nail on the head when describing why people disengage from work.

1. Anonymity: They feel their leaders don't know or care what they are doing.
2. Irrelevance: They don't understand how their job makes a difference.
3. Immeasurement: They cannot measure or assess for themselves the contribution they are making.

I've worked with leaders who suggest this description does not reflect their workforce. They believe that their workforce is aligned and committed to the leader's goals, their environment is open and transparent, and trust permeates their culture. My conversations with their workforce often reveal a different, sometimes brutal reality captured in a study by the folks at Franklin Covey. They found that only 15% of employees surveyed could name even one of the top three goals their leaders had identified as critical. Among those who could name a goal, only 51% said they were committed to achieving it.

Unfortunately, even when best practices are executed at the highest levels of companies, they are often not being cascaded and implemented throughout the company with the kind of fidelity most leaders assume. As support, the Franklin Covey survey found that 81% of everyone surveyed said they were not held accountable to progress against the company's goals. When it comes to coaching, only 34% meet at least monthly with their manager to discuss their progress on goals (best practice = weekly).

Another large workforce study by Towers Watson found that 86% of employees like or love their job. That's the good news. The bad news is that only 21% of employees are truly engaged in their work, saying they would "go the extra mile" for their company. I believe that this huge gap between liking your job and being

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truly engaged in the company's goals represents the biggest lever leaders can use to improve their company's results. They must move people from being satisfactorily disengaged toward being enthusiastically committed to making a difference and winning.

Right about now you're probably saying something like "come on, you think this is more important than strategy or execution, or that new acquisition we're working on?" Yes, I do, because it's the engagement and commitment of your people that will ultimately determine the ROI of all of those other requisite initiatives you and your team are sweating. As support, according to a recent Gallup survey (<http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/166667/five-ways-improve-employee-engagement.aspx>), engaged employees are 21% more productive, have 37% less absenteeism and have 25% lower turnover.

You might also be thinking that your company is different, because you are different. Your people are more engaged because you lead them better than the leaders in these surveys. That might be true, but I encourage you to remember that your information is filtered. No matter how good you are at seeking bad news and constructive criticism, compliments travel to the corner office and up the ivory tower much more smoothly than the brutal facts. The reality in many organizations is that the bulk of the workforce thinks their leaders at the top don't really care about them, and they distrust them. Again as support, in the Towers Watson survey cited above, a mere 38% believe that senior management is sincerely interested in their well-being. Just 44% believe that senior management tries to be visible and accessible. Less than half believe that senior management actions are consistent with the company's core values. And perhaps most disconcerting, less than 40% believe senior management communicates openly and honestly. While your numbers might be much better, I believe all leaders should assume that this is their starting point, and work relentlessly to provide the context their workforce needs to be "all-in".

What Matters Most

No one is obligated to follow anyone. It is increasingly an opt-in or opt-out world. Most people don't just want a job, they want to identify with a meaningful cause. They want their leaders to show authentic commitment and passion for that cause. Leaders need to help the leaders at all levels of their company paint a compelling picture of future prosperity, and they must communicate it long after they think the workforce embraces it. They must be a genuine, convincing, and trustworthy champion of their enterprise's possibilities, and they must help people understand their role in helping their company win and prosper.

As leaders work with their team to craft their communications strategy, they should assume that all of their people need to progress through stages of a change journey. Leaders must persuasively communicate to a target audience that is progressing through denial, resistance, exploration and eventually commitment. The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that there are people distributed throughout all stages. Knowing where your people are on the journey, and tailoring your message is critical.



Once a leader fully appreciates the mindset of their people in these stages of the journey, it is much easier to be receiver-based in their communications. Here are a five communication tips for nurturing your people toward full-on commitment:

1. **Lead transparent “Town Hall” or “All-Hands” meetings as the centerpiece for driving cultural transformation, engagement, and ownership.** In these meetings, I suggest these proven methods:
 - Tie everything back to your vision, purpose, core values, strategic direction, and goals. Share progress as transparently and candidly as possible.
 - Keep your people connected with the impact your business has on society. Don't take it for granted. They need you to connect them with the marketplace and external environment honestly and objectively by sharing the positive and negative facts. Give them reasons to believe in your company's purpose and promise, and be honest when your not meeting consumer and customer expectations.
 - Showcase difference-makers. Use these meetings to illuminate what success looks like by featuring at least one difference-maker and/or high performing team. Let them tell their story, and make sure they have the coaching they need to communicate their message succinctly.
 - Teach them something important. At each meeting, include a brief session that elevates their business acumen and ability to contribute to goals. For example, include P&L 101 where you provide a simplified explanation of a profit & loss financial statement, and help everyone understand their role and impact, all the way to the factory floor and warehouse.
 - Share wins and losses, and call on difference-makers in the audience to provide details.
 - Illuminate your organization's core values at every meeting by shining a spotlight on employees who recently modeled the values.

- Always allow time for Q&A. If your culture is dormant, there may not be many questions early in the journey. Plant some really tough questions in the crowd ahead of time and answer them with candor to model the openness you seek in your culture. Be honest when you don't know the answer, and resurrect the question later when you secure an answer. Questions will grow over time as you build credibility and trust, as will transparency and alignment.
2. **Champion your company's vision, principles, strategy, and plans with external partners.** Your business partners, customers, and suppliers want to know that your company is led by someone who understands their strategies and goals, and that you are dedicated to finding common ground upon which you can collaborate to achieve mutually beneficial results.
 3. **Maximize your time with the troops and listen to them.** Schedule “walk-around time” and treat it like an important meeting every day. Don't forget your people in more remote locations such as the field sales force, factories and distribution centers, and international operations. It's the same way I treat physical exercise. If you don't make it a priority and schedule it, it won't happen. For example, I like doing regularly scheduled “delta breakfasts” with 8-10 employees who have diverse roles from different parts of the company. I provide them treats, and we have a casual discussion about our culture and the challenges they face in their jobs. By listening to them and showing them that I sincerely care about them, I receive in return valuable unfiltered insight, and it gives me an opportunity to reinforce our strategic direction and core values. I also reinforce their role and accountability. I borrowed this idea from Jerry Quindlen, one of the best teammates and leaders with whom I have worked. For more insight regarding connecting with and listening to the troops, I recommend watching this outstanding, 4 minute video produced by Leadercast featuring Rorke Denver at <http://www.leadercast.com/now/leadership-principles/being-present-as-a-leader/>.
 4. **Prioritize and participate in talent review sessions beyond your direct reports, and extend your influence deeply into the talent recruitment process.** This will send an important message that all supervisors in your company should care about the acquisition, development, and retention of top talent. For more on this topic, I highly recommend the article *Building A Team Of A Players* by Kevin Ryan.
 5. **Catch people doing something well.** This sounds obvious, but similar to many sports coaches, I'm often surprised how many leaders either under-value or forget the impact of rewarding success and creating a model for others to emulate. They spend the bulk of their time screaming instructions to players making mistakes rather than highlighting those who exhibit excellence. When a coach or a leader puts a player or employee on a pedestal for outstanding performance or behavior, they extend their influence exponentially by providing their team or workforce instructional insight to what success looks like, and they motivate others to step up their performance. Send hand written notes, and structure rewards for both outstanding results and desired behaviors. For example, I like giving annual President's Awards publicly at Town Hall Meetings to employees who exhibit the company's stated core values. Make sure criteria are clearly defined and communicated. To be clear, I am not suggesting that leaders should avoid tough conversations and constructive guidance when needed. But balance is key because nobody likes following a leader who is constantly playing whack-a-mole.

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For additional advice, I recommend the book *Unusually Excellent* by John Hamm. John understands that leaders must be able to stand in their follower's shoes and see themselves from that view. He prescribes nine leadership skills that can help leaders significantly increase the percentage of their workforce that responds affirmatively when asked, "Who's in?"

A Success Model

Joe Mallof joined SC Johnson Wax as President of North America in the late 1990's after a successful career at Proctor & Gamble. I learned more from Joe about engaging the workforce and getting everybody on the same page than any other leader with whom I've worked. I wasn't the only one. In fact, just one year after joining the company, our CEO at the time, Bill Perez, stated publicly at an Officer's Meeting that Joe had a bigger impact on SCJ in his first year than anyone he had witnessed in his three decades at the company.

Joe immediately embraced the family culture at SCJ by sitting down with everyone face to face, bringing a picture of his family, telling stories, and asking questions that showed he was genuinely interested in everyone he was leading. He also communicated relentlessly. He wasn't flashy. What you saw was what you got. A straight-shooter who clearly took his leadership responsibility seriously. Joe was rarely in his office because he maximized time with the people he led and the consumers and customers we served. For example, when he approved new packaging, branding and graphics, it was done in a store on retail shelves, not in a conference room. He worked collaboratively to get everyone aligned on a succinct, one page strategic plan, and he taught our leadership team how to deploy it to maximize commitment. Communication was the centerpiece.

SCJ had company-wide communications meetings before Joe joined us, but he took them to a new level by adding additional venues for genuine engagement with *all* employees. We were no longer talking at employees, but with them. Before Joe, there was one presentation that was repurposed prioritizing the convenience of the leadership team. Under Joe's leadership, we pressed the flesh and took our message directly to everyone regardless of location and shift. We touched everybody. If you were on the agenda, what was once a one-time presentation suddenly morphed into a 24-hour road show across several venues. Joe made sure we left no one untouched, and they responded.

As workforce commitment to achieving our shared goals improved, results followed suit. Joe leveraged SCJ's culture of innovation and family values by getting all hands on deck. More and more people knew they played a role in our collective future prosperity because Joe taught our leadership team how to engage and align an entire workforce. We were all in-it-to-win-it, together, because Joe Mallof was a leader who fully appreciated that people need context and transparent communication to sign up for and fully commit to changing behavior, culture, and ultimately bottom line results.



About the Author

Jude Rake is a veteran CEO with a 30+ year track record of building businesses to create economic value, from well known consumer packaged goods companies such as Clorox, PepsiCo, and SC Johnson, to smaller



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