
CAN WE TALK?

The Key to a Productive Communication Plan

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I’ll always remember the way an employee once described her boss’s management style. “It was one of two things: either I got a lecture or I got the silent treatment.”

All too often managers and supervisors employ only one-way communication with their employees. They become so concerned with their own agenda and the paperwork that needs to be processed (e.g. preparing and signing Performance Review forms) that they ignore the person sitting right across the desk from them! They fail to master the art of listening, and in turn fail to tap into the most valuable resource within their company – **the employees themselves!**

LET’S TALK© is the communication program that we have designed to help managers break free from those ancient patterns and to adopt new, productive ones. LET’S TALK© provides employers with a structure for initial and ongoing dialogue with each of their employees. It stresses face-to-face communication between the supervisor and the individual employee.

Relationships 101

The purpose behind LET’S TALK© is to help managers develop strong, mutually supportive relationships with its employees. This creates an environment in which a supervisor and employee can talk freely, can grow to understand one another and what each expects of the other, and can discuss how to perform their jobs most effectively. When employees are treated with respect, and when management not only solicits their opinions but also responds to them, an environment of trust and openness is created.

When you think about it, this is the basis of all sound interpersonal relationships. And when this level of cooperation and respect exists between supervisors and employees, it can only spell success for a company’s human resource program.

Come In – It’s Not Locked

LET’S TALK© helps create an open-door environment within companies – an environment in which employees feel they

can express themselves freely without fear of repercussion. When employees know that their opinions and suggestions are encouraged, they feel that they *belong*, that they *matter*, and that their employer recognizes and values their particular contributions. In such an environment third-party intervention is not necessary. When an employee knows that his or her grievances and opinions are taken seriously, the prospect of a union poses no threat. Using LET’S TALK© creates a visible sign that a company wants to treat its employees well and serves as clear evidence of a company’s good intentions to remain union-free. This is Positive Employee Relations in action.

But How Does It Work?

The initial phase of LET’S TALK© consists of a private discussion between a supervisor and each of his or her employees. The supervisor uses our proven techniques so that the conversation is beneficial to each party. LET’S TALK© works on a twelve-week cycle; a discussion is held every three months over the course of one year.

A well-documented one-on-one communication process is important. LET’S TALK© provides a simple and manageable paper system to ensure that this occurs. The program provides an Agenda in a choice of two formats. For example, an employee might be asked, “How can we make your work more interesting? What do you see as the most important responsibilities of your job? Did you receive adequate training?” Designed to stimulate discussion, the second Agenda format lets the employee select the discussion topics or add her or his own specific topics. The employee is given ample time to complete the Agenda prior to the interview. This is, after all, the *employee’s* interview.

The Follow-Through

Follow-up action on these discussions is crucial to the success of LET’S TALK©. One or two private discussions between an employee and his or her supervisor do *not* a communications program make! That is why this program uses what is called a dual-focused *Action Planner*. Initially, the *Action Planner* helps you organize a list of follow-up action steps as determined during the

interview by you and the employee. It lists follow-up items, responsibilities, and timelines for completion.

The second crucial component of the *Action Planner* is the *Action Contacts*. *Action Contacts* are your ongoing, informal, on-the-job contacts with each employee ("management by walking about" in action). These brief talks provide a format for *continuing* dialogue with the employee, help you to get to know one another, and help you cement a healthy, *long-term* relationship.

"Supervisors learn what questions are appropriate to ask ... and most importantly, how to actively listen."

Roll Camera

The LET'S TALK© program also offers supervisors a two-day videotape-based workshop that is conducted off-site. By filming a variety of role play exercises based on actual company situation, participants have the opportunity to see *themselves as the employee does*, learn firsthand how they can improve their skills, and then try out what they have learned.

Next, the recording is reviewed and feedback is solicited from fellow participants regarding the supervisor's communications efforts. Using an evaluation guide and a sliding rating scale, the participants assess each other's performances. Supervisors gradually learn the value of listening, and of how to build the discussion step by step based on what the employee is saying.

Some common reactions from supervisors upon first seeing themselves

on screen are: "I seem so nervous!" or "Why don't I ever listen?" or "I talk too much!" After two days of these exercises, we see dramatic improvements. Nervousness subsides. Supervisors learn to ask appropriate questions. They learn how to probe, how to create a comfortable environment for discussion, and, most important, how to actively listen.

At the end of the workshop, the recording is given to the participants. When a supervisor is ready to begin this communication process within her or his organization, she or he can replay it and brush up on the LET'S TALK© interpersonal techniques.

Top Down

In order to ensure long-term success, the principles of your communication program must be forged at the top and must be *blessed* at the top.

Listening skills can easily become atrophied. Two-way discussions often require us to develop a whole new attitude and set of listening skills. For your company's communication to be truly effective, all supervisors and managers from the top down must be trained to listen and to probe for information.

Learn to listen to your employees. It sounds simple, but the payoff will astound you. As discussed in our book *Unions Are Not Inevitable!*, effective employee communication programs are critical to maintaining a company's union-free status.

ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER?

Follow these key steps to become an excellent listener.

Find areas of common interest.

What worthwhile ideas can I use? How can they improve our working relationship?

Judge content, not delivery.

Don't allow an employee's personal style to detract from what he or she is telling you. A good listener will separate what is being said from how it is being said.

Withhold evaluation.

Let the employee finish speaking before you interject – no matter how tempting. This constitutes plain old courtesy! Poor listeners are preoccupied with thoughts of how to refute the speaker's ideas, present contrary information, ask an embarrassing question, etc... Subsequent ideas go unheard.

Focus on central ideas.

Try to isolate the employee's most important ideas. Good listeners discriminate between facts and examples; illustrations and ideas; and arguments and supporting evidence.

Stay flexible.

Resist the temptation to control the situation. Remember, this is a two-way "democratic" process. It is the employee's turn. By trying to inject order into a rambling message, you may end up steering employees away from some very crucial thoughts.

Show attention.

Establish eye contact and show facial interest. More than anything else, this tells employees that you are receptive to what they are saying.

Overcome distractions.

Good listeners control distracting sights and sounds (such as open doors and windows) and block out distractions that can't be removed.

Know your own biases.

Be aware of your psychological "deaf spots" (i.e., personal prejudices or values) that can lead you to lose the employee's message altogether.

Listen critically.

Analyze the employee's message. Is what is being said accurate? Distorted? Objective? Up-to-date? Listen between the lines to help you judge the intent and content of what is being said.

Take inventory.

Generally, we think about four times faster than we talk! Thus, poor listeners can quickly become impatient. Good listeners use this lag time to mentally summarize what has been said and where the employee seems to be going.

LET'S TALK© AGENDA

EMPLOYEE _____ DEPARTMENT _____
 MANAGER _____ LET'S TALK DATE/TIME _____

- Forward a copy to your manager two days prior to your LET'S TALK meeting.
- Please check (✓) the items that you would like to discuss under each general heading.
- If there are topics that you would like to talk about in this LET'S TALK session, do not hesitate to write them down under Additional Comments.

1. COMMUNICATIONS

- What's the future for our company?
- Where do I fit into our future?
- Quality/quantity of work-related info.
- Working relationship with manager
- Working relationship with others
- Treatment (courtesy/honesty)

2. RECOGNITION

- Recognition for accomplishments
- Being treated fairly
- Performance Appraisal feedback
- Available job opportunities
- Further job responsibilities wanted
- Skill/job training

3. QUALITY/PRODUCTIVITY

- Planning work
- Productivity
- Quality of parts
- Quality of systems/procedures
- Tools, equipment, supplies
- Suggestions for improvement

4. WAGE/BENEFITS

- Health and benefits plan
- Life insurance/pension plan
- Sick leave/bereavement leave
- Disability/WCB benefits
- Payroll deductions
- Vacation pay/procedures

5. GENERAL

- Parking
- Lunchroom
- Work hours
- Working conditions
- Safety and housekeeping
- Office equipment

6. ADDITIONAL TOPICS/COMMENTS

Copies: (1) Manager (2) Employee

LET'S TALK© ACTION PLANNER

EMPLOYEE _____ LET'S TALK DATE/TIME _____

Based on the discussion, what Action Steps are necessary? Indicate who will complete the Action Steps, and the planned completion date. Record any follow-up comments and the actual completion date.

ACTION STEPS TO BE TAKEN	WHO WILL COMPLETE	PLANNED COMPLETION DATE	FOLLOW-UP NOTES
A.			
B.			
C.			
D.			
E.			

Have actions from previous LET'S TALK meetings been completed? YES NO
 Next scheduled LET'S TALK.....Date _____ Time _____
 or Performance Appraisal..... Date _____ Time _____

Manager/Date **Employee/Date**

Copies: (1) Manager (2) Employee