

March 25, 2009

Hiding Under a Wing

by Tricia Jack, CPPA

An old English poem reads:

*The North wind doth blow and we shall have snow,
And what will poor robin do then, poor thing?
He'll sit in a barn and keep himself warm
and hide his head under his wing, poor thing.*

As the March winds come through the Salt Lake Valley, carrying spring with them, I am reminded of the fact that like the seasons, everything is changing. What we knew to be secure a year or two ago is no longer secure. Things are uncertain. People all around are using that old cliché: "change is the only certainty," and are bracing themselves for that change. Indeed, the "North wind" is blowing. As leaders, are we like the robin, hiding our heads under our wings to brave the storm?

In these times of change and uncertainty, open communication is increasingly important. Leaders and managers must remember that "not saying" something can be interpreted to mean bad news. Recently, a friend of mine was told she had to attend an "all staff" meeting later that week, something that was unusual in her organization. Nobody was excused, which increased the importance of it. She went through days of panic, wondering about the purpose of the meeting. By the time the day came, she was convinced she was being laid off. It turned out to be a meeting that reassured the entire workforce that all is well, even in these uncertain times. Perhaps a little more information would have saved employees a lot of stress and "wondering" what was going to be said, and likely a lot of speculation, too.

If you want your people to trust you, especially in these uncertain times, you better communicate, and communicate well. Good communication is not just passing information down; it is about listening and acting on what you hear. It also implies consistency of information. Managers who communicate well pass messages up and down the line, check to see that they have understood messages correctly and most of all, do something about it!

Communication can be difficult in organizations, but when it is good, it can help employees feel valued. If employees feel valued, their commitment is raised, and work performance is enhanced.

There are a lot of ways communication can happen; for example, email, team meetings, newsletters, intranets, presentations, and one-on-one meetings with managers. It is often best when information is delivered through many channels because some people take more notice of verbal messages and others to written messages. At a strategic level, leaders can develop communication plans for the entire organization, but it is often line managers that are the center of communication, and they are the ones who are responsible for ensuring feedback mechanisms are put in place.

As the North wind blows in your organization, how are you responding?

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