



# THINKING OUT LOUD

## A PSA WHITEPAPER

# The Highest Calling in Executive Communication: Employee Communication

*Why executive communication professionals ought to stop avoiding their employee communication counterparts, and take them to lunch.*

By David Murray,  
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of *Vital Speeches of the Day*

As far as your average executive communication professional is concerned, employee communication is the worst.

- It's thankless. A CEO can kill at Davos if she says anything the least bit novel, but she can't knock 'em dead at an employee town hall unless she announces an across-the-board raise.
- Internal communications often involves those humorless drudges from human resources, with their gibberish about "employee engagement scores," and other technocratic concepts you know to be nonsense.
- And what "authentic" CEO needs your help to say a few words at the employee brown bag lunch, anyway?

I understand. And actually, so do your colleagues in employee communication.

But do you understand *their* problem? Leaders are the most powerful communication conduits they have—and for some strategic messages, the only ones. Employees need to see what their leaders look like when they share the vision, need to hear what they sound like when they talk about the merger.

Nothing you do in external executive communication is any more important than the good work you might do in internal exec comms.

Why do I feel this way?

Because I've been around employee communications for long enough to have founded the *Journal of Communication Management*, long successful and now defunct. And I've been around executive communications since speechwriters smoked pipes.

I've seen the power of both disciplines, and often been frustrated by the dissipated potential that results from their being at cross purposes. So frustrated, in fact, that on behalf of the Professional Speechwriters Association, I'm convening **Leadership Communication Days—Employee Communication Summit**, which will take place at the world headquarters of Conagra Brands in Chicago, May 9-10. The whole purpose will be to get exec comms people and internal comms people on the same page.

On *this* page:

Compelling employee communication requires thoughtful and heartfelt executive communication. Several years ago, I wrote something I grandly called, "Murray's Manifesto." It's brief, as manifestos go.

What exactly do employees want to *know*?

They want to know what kind of people they are working for.

Let me repeat: They want to know what kind of people they are working for.

That's all they want to know: What kind of people they are working for.

But that's a lot: They want to know how smart are the people they're working for. How honest. How empathetic. How interested in new ideas. How down to earth. How consistent. How careful. How generous of spirit. How forward-looking. And how committed to the welfare of the employees.

Seriously. That's all they want to know. You may want to give them other kinds of information, and they may be pleased to get it.

But if you can convince your employees that the people who run the organization are solid human beings who care about what they're doing ... well, that's a team employees will find a way to help.

And if you lack the communication ability to get that across (virtuous executives not included)?

You'd better dance fast.

One CEO discovered this concept without the help of his communication helpers. Harry Herington is chairman of NIC, Inc., an online service provider. Interviewed a few years ago in *The New York Times*, Herington talked about how he changed the way his employees saw him, and in the process transformed his "entire perspective" about how to communicate with them: He showed them his motorcycle.

Shortly after Herington had bought a Harley, the company was organizing a conference of its general managers.

I had 200 employees in Oklahoma City for a marketing conference and I thought, I've got this brand new motorcycle. It's about a six-hour drive from our headquarters near Kansas City. I decided to ride the motorcycle to the conference.

So I pull up and I've got all my leathers on. I walk in carrying my helmet and everybody's dumbfounded. I became the buzz of the conference. The next thing I know, everybody's out looking at my bike. I had so many

fingerprints on it because the employees were just swarming this bike. They thought it was the coolest thing.

I started riding it to our offices in different states. I'd take everyone to dinner, and they would ask me why I bought a motorcycle, and then we would start talking casually about the company. I thought, "Wow, this is a very comfortable, easy setting." I started getting phone calls from my general managers in different cities, saying, "We want you to come visit us on the motorcycle. The employees think this is really cool!"

So he started an "Ask the CEO" forum—you know, the kind of employee town hall where nobody says anything except the Eddie Haskell character who wants to prove how smart he is. Except, in Herington's meetings,

They were asking me all sorts of personal questions, and it kind of got everybody's guard down, so they felt more comfortable.

I had expected people to ask me about our five-year strategy. But I started getting questions like: "Where did you go to school?" ... "Why did you get into law enforcement?" "Why did you leave law enforcement?" "How many kids do you have?" I'm on Facebook a lot, too. So people would say, "I see that you like to wear pink shirts when you play golf. Why?"

I would say, especially early on, 80 percent of the questions were personal and 20 percent were about business.

Why?

They want to trust the leadership. They want to trust that you're making the right decisions. And it's not so much whether you're making the right decisions as far as strategy. It's more, can they trust you to come up with the strategy, and to make the right decisions when issues come before you? They want to know the person. They want to trust the person. That was interesting. That really changed my entire perspective. ...

But that's not a new perspective. It's an old one.

The first book ever written on employee communication—titled plainly, *Sharing Information with Employees* and published in 1942—reminds us of what work was like before the industrial revolution—before formal employee communication and executive communication were necessary. Author Alexander Heron describes what he calls "the old understanding."

We might find our picture of the old understanding in a wagon shop, a grist mill, a cotton mill, a pottery or cutlery shop. Let us find it in a

furniture shop. Perhaps eight men work there. One of them is the boss. He owns the shop, but he works there, visibly. The other seven receive wages. The work done by the boss is not all done with tools; sometimes he uses a pencil. He draws designs, writes occasional letters, puts down figures about wages, costs, and prices.

The other seven know, quite closely, how much money the boss had saved up from his earnings as a journeyman before he started in business for himself; in other words, how much “capital” he had and how long it took him to save it up. The shop or factory is on the same lot as the house where the boss lives; he owns it. The other seven know how much his taxes are each year. They helped to build the ten-by-thirty addition to the shop last year, and they know how much that cost. They were all in on the discussion before the new lathe was bought, and they remember the price and the freight. They remember how the boss borrowed some of the money from his wife’s sister.

They know that the dining room “suite” on which they are working now is for Jane Winton, [who] used to be Jane Carey, the schoolteacher, before she married Bill Winton, the banker. They know it has to be as good as the furniture she saw in Buffalo, and that if it is good Bill’s mother is going to give the boss an order for another lot which will keep them all busy through the winter.

They see the finished job emerging under their skilled hands, day by day. They know how difficult it was to get the seasoned walnut, and what it finally cost, what price is to be paid for the finished job, how much the boss will “make” on it, and how much of that will go to pay off the loan from the sister-in-law.

They know that the boss has gradually built a reputation for honest quality and skilled workmanship and that they are part of that reputation. They know why once in a while they have had to wait a little for their wages—when the taxes had to be paid before the money came in for the new counter and fixtures at the drugstore.

Above all, they know the boss. Their attachment to him is basically not sentimental but practical. He is the salesman who gets the orders which bring work to them. He collects the money which pays their wages. He manages to accumulate the working space and the equipment. They are realistic enough to know that they can get their full and fair share of the income of the business. They laugh at anyone who talks of the conflict between labor and capital, between them and the boss.

They know. Because they know, they understand. And in that full and

simple understanding they “put themselves” into every job.

Now, of course Heron, a corporate labor relations executive at the time, understands that big companies are not furniture shops. But he argues that, to whatever extent possible, they must be made to feel like the shop he describes. Employees need an understanding of the basic economics of their business, who the customers are, who the competition is, what the expectation of quality is and—this is where exec comms pros are needed to help—what kind of person the boss is.

The highest purpose of employee communication, as Alexander Heron describes it, is nothing short of what he calls “the American idea”:

The deliberate effort to share business information with the great majority who work for wages corresponds closely to the deliberate plan to make education freely available to the people.

... we have all of us, every adult citizen, been jointly and equally entrusted with the government of our nation, state, and city. That government is increasingly engaged in the protection and regulation of the economic interests of all of us. It is inconceivable that the ... millions of us who work for wages can do a good job, or even a safe job, of governing by votes, without knowing more and more about our economic interests.

The American idea has no place for a class predestined to be wage earners incapable of understanding a world beyond the workbench, no place for a class which is denied the opportunity to reason its conclusions on facts which it helps to create, no place for a class which is happier because ignorant of anything beyond the daily task. And those whose sense of superiority leads them to believe in either the necessity or the desirability of such classes are themselves enemies of the American idea or ignorant of its genius.

To the extent that executive communication is a crucial contributor to employee communication, can you see how the “internal stuff,” if it’s taken seriously and executed strategically and organized sustainably, could be far more important to the organization than any high-profile speech or an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*—and contributing, even, to a greater society?

If employee communicators succeed, Heron wrote almost 70 years ago, they will have achieved something great.

Without destroying the efficiency of modern big business, the pooling of capital, the productiveness of great industrial plants, we shall have restored the living, understanding relationship ... into which our

grandfathers put their strength and interest, because they knew, and understood!

To the extent they succeed, they're going to need a partner in executive communication.

Do they have a partner in you?

Bring them to Chicago in May.

At the very least, take them to lunch today.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Murray is editor and publisher of *Vital Speeches of the Day*, an 83-year-old collection of the best oral communication in the world. He's also executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association.

David writes and speaks frequently on corporate, political and personal communication issues.

David co-wrote the *New York Times*-bestselling memoir *Tell My Sons* (Random House, 2013) and a memoir *Raised by Mad Men*, about his parents, who worked in the ad business in the 1960s.

He has written feature stories on politics, golf, murder, hairpiece making, boxing, ballet, homelessness, motorcycling, the state supreme court, sailing, dinosaurs, professional poker and other related subjects.

His work has appeared in publications and media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Advertising Age*, *Sailing Magazine*, *Golf Magazine*, *Car Collector Magazine*, *Vibe*, the Huffington Post and Chicago Public Radio.

He lives with his wife and daughter in Chicago.