# Communications Skills for Managers Old and New

Or, How to be a Terrific Boss

By Terry Barker

Part one of the three-part **Bosstalk** Series

[Communications Skills for Managers Old and New](http://www.amazon.ca/Communication-Skills-Managers-Old-BossTalk-ebook/dp/B00ABKOFIC/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195559&sr=8-1&keywords=communications+skills+for+managers+terry+barker)

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## Introduction

Who are you, anyway? How did you get to be boss? How do you connect with other people? Why do you need to read a book about boss skills in the first place? Why do today’s managers, supervisors, parents, volunteer coordinators and teachers need effective communication skills?

Welcome to the first part of my special Bosstalk series. You’re in for quite a ride! Nothing quite compares to the challenges and rewards of managing staff in the new millennium. The skills I teach are not new; they are tried and true. However, the context for managing in the modern age is unprecedented. Many leaders today have found themselves painted into a rather nasty corner: the patterns they have developed over a lifetime, or the role models they inherited from the past, just don't work any more.

We used to admire the hard-nosed Captain of Industry who would retire to his office, dream up a brilliant new scheme, and grandly announce it to his obedient staff. When he spoke, we listened.

It made sense. Fifty years ago, who of us had the education or skills to be able to contribute much? The boss was the Man On Horseback. He led, we followed. If he ever did ask us what we thought about something, we said things like, “Well, you're the one who's paid to think around here.”

Today, we have a new generation of employees. Most of us have at least high school graduation, and vast numbers have university degrees, college diplomas, and/or a passel of night school courses under our belts.

We want to get involved, to participate. We want to show commitment and creative energy. We want to take part in problem identification, solution finding and decision making — all the neat stuff we used to think of as “managerial prerogatives”. And if the boss won't let us in on things, we tell her to take a hike down Main Street till she can smell the salt flats.

In 1941, a 14-year old boy got his first summer job. Jobs were easy for kids to get in those days because the men were away at war.

His task was to wash glass milk bottles in a dairy. He pushed crates of dirty bottles on a roller table through a metal housing where jets of hot water and caustic soda shot up at high velocity and cleaned them. Then he walked to the other end of the machine, off-loaded now-clean crates of bottles, picked up more dirty ones from the opposite side of the facility, placed them on the roller table, and repeated the whole procedure.

*Fifty cents an hour, not bad in those days.*

On the first morning, he noted that if some large storage cupboards were moved so that the trucks could unload dirty crates nearer to his machine, his task would be much easier.

He approached his boss this way: “Hey, the way you got this set up, it's really stupid.”

His boss looked at that 14-year old employee on his first day at work, and said, “Listen, sonny, there's something you better learn about working. There's only two kinds of people around here: those who think and those who do. I'm the first kind, and you're the second kind. Don't ever forget that.”

The kid went back to work, wiser than before, and did not offer any further ideas. That's the way things were done in 1941. Why listen to a kid? What could a new kid on his first day on the job possibly have to say that would be worth listening to?

*Except the kid was right.*

If his boss had listened to him, he could have got 30% more work out of him. Not counting the stellar idea he might have delivered next week, and the genuine barn-burner that he might have suggested next month — the one that could have saved the company from bankruptcy.

This sort of thing is long gone, right? Well....listen to the sewer foreman of a small city in Northern Ontario recall a 1984 disaster that became a celebrated local scandal:

City Hall was building a drop-in center for senior citizens. By the time the newspaper got hold of the story, the project was six weeks late and $50,000 over budget. But the worst thing about the scandal is that it didn't have to happen.

I've worked for the city for 30 years. I know every manhole and sewer pipe in town.

I was driving by the new drop-in center when I noticed they were getting ready to pave the parking lot.

So I go to the engineer in charge and say, “Hey, you're not going to pave that before you hook up the sewer are you?”

And the engineer says, “What do you know about it? The sewer outlet is right next to the building.”

“No it isn't,” I say. “It's way over there, on the far side of the parking lot. You better hook up before you pave over.”

Well, the engineer gets real shirty and bangs a bunch of blueprints down on the table.

“Listen,” he says, “the way I see it, there's just two kinds of people around here — those who can read blueprints and those who can't. I'm the first kind and you're the second kind. Now go back to your sewer.”

So the sewer foreman shrugged his shoulders and volunteered nothing more. But sure enough, when they went to hook up the sewer the outlet was right where the foreman said it was — on the other side of the parking lot. So they had to tear up all the fresh paving and send away for more pipe, and the whole thing cost six weeks and $50,000.

We need to learn how to communicate more effectively with subordinates, children, friends and volunteers with whom you are having difficulties.

Communication is the bottom line skill of today’s style of managing.

If you can communicate better with sewer workers and foremen, and your ratty Grade10 kid who's failing math and wants to hang around the mall, and the volunteers who staff your hospital gift shop, you will release a flood of creative energy that will almost drown you.

A woman who supervises the cleaners in a large hospital tells this story:

One of my cleaners suggested a new industrial strength cleaning compound that he'd seen advertised. Now, in the past I would merely have told him that I would test it out and let him know, but for some reason I said instead that I would buy some for him to try, and he could report back on it.

Two weeks later I called a meeting, the first one the cleaners had ever had. They sidled in suspiciously — expecting to get fired, I was later told.

I said that Joe was going to report on a new cleanser.

Joe was really nervous. The cleaners had never had a meeting before. Why would they? The job is routine and boring. Ever watch cleaners' eyes? Their minds are far away. Why should you expect them to have anything to say? Why should you expect them to get excited about their work when the moment they finish mopping a floor, people step all over it? The work is never finished, and there are no rewards!

Joe mumbled a few words about the new cleaner, and we all decided to give it a try, and that was the end of it. Well, no, not the end. A week later one of the other cleaners approached me, saying, 'So you're having meetings now, eh?'

“Not exactly,” I said. “Why?”

“Well, I got some, uh, ideas for rescheduling,” he said.

Rescheduling? I called a meeting, and that cleaner came prepared to argue his case with overhead transparencies and large wall maps. What do cleaners think about when they're pushing that broom? I would have said Nothing Much, but that meeting taught me differently. He was brilliant! You should understand that my hospital is seven large and ancient buildings connected with tunnels and bridges — we'd been scrubbing it the same way for the 20 years I'd been supervising there — and now I was discovering that there were better ways to do it, and what's more, that these cleaners knew what those ways were.

The result was that we completely overhauled the operation.

I have the most motivated cleaning staff in the city. They love their work. Other cleaners may have that vacant stare that comes from terminal boredom, but not my guys! You should see them!

Mind you, there are occasional complaints. Not everyone wants motivation. Last week a head nurse raked me over the coals because two cleaners burst in on her conference and told everyone to lift their feet.

Still, I'd a lot sooner have guys I have to slow down rather than a bunch of bored losers whose fires I have to light each shift. Wouldn't you?

Stories like this are commonplace today, as employees are let in on what used to be considered managerial areas.

In the space of one lifetime, we've moved from the Industrial Age where we treated people like dumb machines and had to use force to get them to do degrading work, to the Information Society where people are regarded as the most precious assets in an organization. A wonderful change!

In 60 years, we have moved from a culture in which you got your Grade 12 and your trade — enough to hold you (educationally speaking) till you died — to a community dedicated to life-long learning. Formal education is only the anteroom to endless storerooms of knowledge.

Here's a useful chart to help us think about how our leadership styles have changed over the centuries:

**PERIOD|TIME FRAME | BEHAVIOUR**

AGRICULTURE |10,000 B.C. To mid 1700’s AD AUTOCRATIC

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION | Mid 1600's to mid 1900's SCIENTIFIC

INFORMATION | Mid 1900's on COOPERATIVE

Of course these dates are only approximate. Agriculture was discovered in various parts of the world at various times, but regardless of where, when or how, the result was always the same: an enormous change in our social contract. It meant that we stopped the nomadic existence of wandering, hunting and gathering, and instead learned to stay in one place to tend the crops. Thus villages, towns and cities became possible.

It's obvious, isn't it, that an absolute requirement of civilization is sufficient stability to create institutions — such as hospitals, libraries, schools, government, and so on.

The classical world empires of Alexander and Caesar Augustus were based on slavery. How do you get slaves to obey? Whip them, of course. So for thousands of years, autocracy was the style of choice. For the organizations which have survived into our own century, such as the Roman Catholic Church, it remains so. Even parenthood in many places still runs according to the old rules: life and death power over children.

But when industrialization allowed us to do away with slavery, we had to start developing new ways of dealing with workers. This book focuses on communications as the tool du jour. If you can talk to folks – and listen when they respond – you have a real chance of making management work.

Why do people stop doing business with a company? It's not usually that the clients moved or went bankrupt — rather, it's because they had confrontations with employees.

Surveys tell us that people think of a company in terms of the last significant employee they met. When someone asks you your opinion of Sears for instance, you're not likely to quote their annual report: rather, you'll say something like, “Yeah, they're a great company. Last week I returned a watch, the clerk was really friendly and helpful.”

The fact is that the most important people in an organization are those who interface directly with the customer.

But these are precisely the ones at the bottom of the ladder. They have the least training and get the lowest pay, yet they are the ones who will make or break the company's image with the buyers and users.

Today we are learning to invert the pyramid. Instead of layer after layer of managers and supervisors and forepersons and lead hands telling the employee what to do, we are learning how to help them do the job better. In short, we are starting to turn commanders into enablers.

But it's a lot harder to enable than to command. Enabling takes a lot of skill.

We have to learn how to climb down off that managerial or parental high horse and actually talk to the folks. Some companies call it “flattening out” — reducing the number of command layers.

We have to learn to listen a whole lot better than we ever have before. We have to learn to move from punishment into salvage.

What do employees need to know if they are to care about their work? One author suggested these six essential questions:

What's my job?

How am I doing?

Does anybody care?

How is my team doing?

How does my team plug into the organization?

How can I help?

Note that question six is the motivator. We can't expect people to reach high performance levels until they know what they're supposed to be doing, that someone is giving them useful feedback, that the boss cares, and that they are part of a company and a team. Once folks know where the company is going and how they plug in, they are in a position to look around and offer real help — above and beyond the job description.

Motivation, in this view, is the product of good vertical and horizontal communications.

So this is the question – “What are the communication skills that I need in order to function as an excellent manager, supervisor, foreperson, lead hand, parent or volunteer leader?” Just reading a book isn’t good enough – you must actually practice the skills.

Learning, however, always feels artificial the first time you try it.

Actors feel completely phony and insincere the first time they read through a new script, but after a week of rehearsal they are at home with the character.

Managers, too, feel like fakes when they treat employees like adults instead of reducing them to rubble as they were accustomed to doing in the past. (The employees sometimes don't make it easy on you, either: if you move from Attilla the Hun to Randy Rational overnight, they may suspect you of some devious plot. But if you persist, they'll get over it).

And parents too feel like hypocrites when they swallow their outrage at young Johnny's report card and say instead, “How can I help?”

People often use arguments like these as excuses for not changing their behaviour. “I know I'm doing things badly,” they say, “but at least I'm being myself.”

*What amazing nonsense!*

As adults we learn to ski, play chess, and operate a computer. We learn new jobs when we get fired or transferred. But at the same time we say we can't learn to listen better or be more humane or take more time and care with people!

This kind of learning is like any other. If you want to do it — and you have access to the information that will teach you how — then you can.

## Getting Started

Wow, what a feeling! You got the promotion, the raise in pay, and the new responsibilities! And now you can do all those neat things you always wanted to do but didn't have the authority for.

But wait a minute. Becoming a new boss is like visiting a foreign country for the first time. It helps a lot if you know the language. If you can't speak it you could get taken at the bazaars.

The first few weeks as boss (supervisor, manager, head of bowling team, parent) are crucial. Staff watch you closely to see what your style is, how they can best relate to you, and what they can get away with. It's the old business about “first impressions” — they are lasting. And if you think about it for a minute, it does make sense. Staff are vulnerable. They HAVE to assess the new boss fast and correctly! (Don't you do exactly the same thing when you get a change of boss?)

So it's worthwhile to do some advance thinking about how to present yourself. We will examine three kinds of “new boss” problems:

-the popular worker who gets promoted and is now supervising erstwhile buddies;

-the formerly acting boss who now is Number Two to the job previously held; and

-the person who gets a temporary managerial role but will have to give it up again.

Presented to you now are three true stories. Here's the game: you read the stories and decide what you would have done if they had happened to you. Then read the suggested solutions at the end. If your actions match the ones suggested, give yourself a cup of tea. If they don't, eat a wet tea bag. OK?

## GAME 1: THE HONEYMOON

Angela was a nurse in a home for the aged. She was very popular among her co-workers, and when she got the nod as supervisor everyone was delighted. Good old Angela, they all cheered. The best possible choice for boss!

Everything went fine for a few weeks, but then Angela began having problems with the Casuals roster, a list of nurses available for occasional work: mostly married women who liked to keep their hand in by working a day or two a week. The problem was that the list wasn't being kept up to date. Many times she phoned name after name, only to be told rather irritably that they weren't available this week, and they'd phoned in, for goodness sake, and what was the matter with her anyway?

The responsibility for keeping the roster up was shared by Mary and Louise, two of Angela's good friends. She mentioned it to them several times in a nice way, but it was passed off (usually at a tea break) with a laugh: “Honest, Ange, we just haven't the time!” But Angela knew they did have the time, and just didn't want to be bothered.

One day she gave them a direct order. “Listen,” she said, “I've really had it with this Casuals roster business. Now, for the last time, I'm telling you to keep it up to date.”

Both nurses responded by cutting her dead. They simply treated her as though she wasn't there. Also, they talked to the other nurses about Angela. “Whatever happened to good old Angela?” they said. “She sure has changed. Become part of Management, she has. Not like she used to be. They all go that way, don't they?”

Angela held out for three weeks before she gave in. She told Mary and Louise not to bother, she'd take the Casuals roster over.

After that, she never issued a direct order. She merely posted new routines and directives on the notice board, and did the necessary administration. A few times she tried to join the nurses in a tea break, but she felt unwelcome.

## GAME 2: REJECTED ROBERTA

Marjorie Carson won the competition for Office Manager in a government department. On her first day as the new boss, her manager took her around and introduced her to the staff. “And this is Roberta Downs,” the manager said, introducing Marjorie to a middle-aged woman. Marjorie extended her hand, but Roberta turned her back.

Later, the manager told Marjorie that Roberta had been Acting Office Manager for six months. She had attempted the competition, but was beaten out by Marjorie. Roberta had done an excellent job as Acting Office Manager, but Marjorie had better qualifications.

“Don't worry about it,” the manager said. “She's a bit miffed right now, but she'll get over it.”

That was the beginning of an eight-month period of undeclared war. Marjorie gave Roberta all the worst jobs and Roberta retaliated by leading a whispering campaign against her.

## GAME 3: THE TEMPORARY BOSS

Fred Wills was in his second year teaching at the only high school in a small town. During his Christmas holidays he was approached by the local school superintendent: would he be willing to act as principal at J.D. Watts Elementary School for six months? The former principal, Bill Braithwaite, had died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Fred agreed, and bought himself a new car on the strength of the increase in pay.

On January 3, when he had completed his first day with his Grade Six class, a delegation of eight women teachers waited at his door.

“We feel that one of us should have been promoted to principal,” they told him. “Most of us have been

teaching in this very school for twenty years or more. We know this school. You don't. You only got the job because you're a man! We know that this school board has an unspoken and unwritten prejudice against women principals.”

*TIME OUT*

Take a few minutes to think about these cases before proceeding.

There are lots of pleasures and creative challenges waiting for you as the new boss, but we are examining the traps and problems. Here are some of the alligators that lie in waiting for any newly promoted supervisor or manager:

*Pre-Existing Conflicts*

The new kid on the block is quickly aligned in favour of one side or the other. He is seen either as a possible ally or as the enemy. Same with the new boss. You don't know what office currents are waiting to speed you along. Don't commit yourself to any faction until you've had time to explore the situation thoroughly. When you do understand what's going on you'll probably want to mediate the conflict rather than join the fight.

*Envy*

There may be one or two people working for you who tried out for your position — and lost. Naturally, they'll think they are better qualified than you. Maybe they are! They may try to sabotage you to prove that management made a bad decision.

One of the first things you must do is to have a private interview with each member of your staff. Let them know that you appreciate their expertise and will rely on their local knowledge. Tell them that you run a team show, and you'll be looking forward to getting them in on problem-solving and decision-making. This won't ensure that they won't knife you in the back, but it does open up direct communication links.

*Old Habits*

Staff may be used to extended Friday lunch hours in the pub or tavern. Maybe you used to do it too. You'll want to stop the practice, but if you sweep too fast and too clean you'll have a revolution on your hands. Instead of giving an order to stop Friday afternoon drinking contests, arrange for important work sessions for 1:30 P.M.

Take your time, but when you want to change behaviour, do it positively, not negatively. That is, don't punish: reward!

*Friendships*

Your old work buddies are now your subordinates. At first they are delighted because “Good old Bill knows what it's like to be a working stiff”. But the day will come when you'll have to enforce an unpopular ruling, or engage in disciplinary actions. On that day, the honeymoon is over. If you try to evade the responsibilities of the job by passing the buck or turning a blind eye, they'll lose respect for you.

The truth is, the higher you go in management, the less intimate your relations will be with the people who work for you.

Be friendly, but not friends. Friendship means intimacy — sharing dreams, private information, secrets. It also means that there are obligations on each side. The problem is not so much that your subordinate might cash in on the friendship — it's that everyone else will think he might.

When it comes time for promotion, what will you do?

If you promote your buddy, even if he's the best qualified, the rest of the staff may accuse you of favouritism.

But if you don't promote him, it's not fair. Why should he be penalized for being your friend?

Make a deal with your close buddies. Sit down with them one at a time and lay it all out. Do it when you're feeling calm and rational. Ask them to see your dilemma. What you'll probably decide is to keep the friendship going outside the work place, but cool it on the job. That's being professional!

*Team Disruption*

Changing bosses in mid-stream is traumatic for staff. Many of them will lie awake nights, worrying about what kind of ogre you might be.

Get them working on creative projects together as soon as you can. If you can't find projects, call them together anyway and discuss with them what needs to be done most urgently. You yourself must model the open, positive behaviour that you want from them.

Here are some thoughts about the cases but bear in mind that because these are real-life situations, full of an infinity of detail, other answers could work just as well.

## ANALYSIS OF GAME 1: THE HONEYMOON

Angela failed her first test. Mary and Louise used their “friendship” with Angela to challenge her authority. When Angela bowed to the weight of social disapproval and said she would take over the Casuals roster, she abdicated her position.

*What should she have done?*

She should have sat down with Mary and Louise the very first time the roster was not updated and had a planning discussion. “We have to share the load here,” she might have said in the privacy of her office. “How shall we go about keeping the Casuals roster up to date?”

By asking a question instead of giving an order, she might have learned that Mary and Louise were given the hated task a year before as a punishment. It's time it was passed on to someone else. Because they were all friends together they assumed that Angela knew this. So they interpreted her order as a continuing of the punishment. And they cut her dead!

*What should she do now?*

It's never too late to patch up old wounds. Angela should sit down with her two old friends and level with them. She might say, “Look, things really went off the rails. Can't we go back to Square One?”

This story has a happy ending. Angela took a course in Assertiveness Training and learned how to lay her cards on the table. Certainly, a large part of her problem was her timidity. She did call a frank and open discussion a month later, to Mary and Louise's great relief, and managed to climb back into the saddle.

## ANALYSIS OF GAME 2: REJECTED ROBERTA

To Marjorie, this was an example of the disaffected former temporary boss sabotaging the enterprise. But what Roberta saw was a classic case of New Boss Insensitivity.

Roberta had kept the ship afloat for six months. She had done a good job of leading the staff and handling problems. She felt that there must have been favouritism involved, or why wouldn't she have won the job? She was doing it well, wasn't she?

Nevertheless, on the morning when Marjorie was introduced, Roberta decided to keep a stiff upper lip and do her best. But she was unexpectedly overcome by emotion, and turned away for a moment. When she turned back, Marjorie had passed on to the next person. After that, Roberta felt that Marjorie picked on her unmercifully.

*What should Marjorie have done?*

Once she had been told by her own boss that Roberta had been Acting Office Manager, Marjorie should have called her in for a special interview. She could have given her full credit for having carried on so successfully, and asked for her cooperation. By doing so, she runs the risk of Roberta feeling that she is “leaning on her”, but the advantage is that by working together they can establish good communication.

As it happened, eight months later they found themselves in the same corner at the Christmas party. They had both been sampling the punch too freely.

When they compared notes on their hostilities and traced it back to the first meeting, Roberta said, “I didn't mean anything personal, though I can see why you'd think so. I just didn't want you to see me in such a state.”

Marjorie said, “Why didn't you say something a long time ago? We've wasted a lot of time.”

But Roberta countered, “That would have been a lot easier for you to do than for me.”

## ANALYSIS OF GAME 3: THE TEMPORARY BOSS

A good rule of thumb for temporary bosses is to get staff together right away and ask for their cooperation. Put it to them this way: “We all have to keep the ship afloat for the next six months. To be honest with you, I didn't apply for this job, and I know that any one of you could do it probably better. But lightning struck here, so that's the way we go. Can we work together? Keep our momentum up and our flag flying? Let's talk about how we're going to do things. I've got a few ideas written down, but I'd like to hear from you first. Susan?”

*What should Fred have done on his first day?*

Under the circumstances, Fred should have made personal contact with each teacher over the holidays, before the start of the new semester. He could have used an approach like the above, and gained their cooperation and commitment before the new term even began.

*How should he deal with the delegation?*

Since the fat is now in the fire, Fred had better jump in too. He'd better march them all down to the school library and call an instant staff meeting. Encourage them to get their disappointments and suspicions out in the open. Take an empathetic approach. Be a listening ear. Then, when everyone had finished expressing their outrage, say this: “I can certainly see what you mean. It must be a terrible feeling, to teach here all these years and then have a young guy like me come in as principal. But what do you think we should do about it?”

It may take a few sessions, and a commitment on his part to help try to change an unjust policy, but if he is really open and honest and caring, they can probably weather the term.

In real life, Fred actually did march them all down to the library, and they had it out. He belatedly understood how they felt, and they in turn felt sorry for Fred. The poor guy had been given an impossible task! They got very motherly about him, and created a kind of phalanx against the school board. In the spring Fred and his teachers made a joint proposal to the board to join the modern world and quit their bigotry about women principals. One of the senior women teachers was appointed acting principal for the year to come, and she promised to upgrade her training. Fred returned to the high school in the fall.

*Some Good Advice*

The best advice one can offer the new boss is to think before you speak. If you go in with that New Broom Syndrome and scare everybody, you'll reap a lot of resentment. Or if you are too timid to act, you'll lose their respect. Think: plan: involve your staff: give them creative and meaningful work to do.

Communicating effectively is not a hard language to learn. In fact, you already know it. There are no technical terms or complex logical constructs — just good common sense and a feeling for the other person.

Being sensitive to your staff isn't bleeding heart liberalism: it's good management that pays off in production, loyalty, and strike-free years.

## Communicating Skills

It's no surprise that we communicate poorly. The big surprise is that we can communicate at all.

Consider what goes on when you read something. You have ten billion working neurons, or brain cells, as do I, the writer of this page. They operate on chemistry and electricity. Your brain generates enough juice to operate a flashlight bulb.

My brain generates electro-chemical patterns, which are called “meaning”. I send messages to arms, hands and fingers, which in turn press keys on the keyboard. Symbols flash on the screen. I write, read, and revise — all with different portions of the brain. (I could suffer certain types of brain damage which would allow me to write or revise but not read: and others which would allow me to read but not write or revise). You read them, and your eyes send neural messages to the brain, where they are translated into further patterns which you call “meaning”. The success of the transmission between us is measured by how similar the patterns are.

The degree of similarity can be improved if you have access to me. You can phone me up and ask, “Do I understand what you think you wrote?”

I can then ask you, “What do you think you understand?” Between us, we can reach some clarity, though no two human beings can ever understand each other perfectly and totally.

Nevertheless, we can do better. Consider something as basic as giving an order. “Go left,” you tell the driver. “Left?” he asks. “Right,” you confirm, and he makes the turn, and there you are, facing four lanes of traffic on a one-way street.

“You said right!” the terrified driver screams.

“I meant correct!” you yell, as the metal rips and the glass shatters. Your epitaph reads that you were done in by a bad driver, but it really ought to read that you did yourself in with an ambivalent message.

Let's discuss some actual cases.

*Case One: The Eager Employee*

Fred Ryan was a new constable who had just finished Recruit Field Training. He was keen and enthusiastic.

His new boss asked him to write a report of the incidence of Break and Enter cases in his detachment area. Ryan got the bit between his teeth and really did a number on the project. He worked a lot of unrecorded overtime and even got his wife to help with the proofing and typing. He completed the task two days before his deadline. He was very proud of it.

When he actually delivered it, however, his boss had forgotten that he had assigned it. When he did remember, he laughed and threw the file in the waste basket: “Damn, I'm sorry,” he chuckled, “I guess I forgot to tell you. That information was in the computer all the time, so I had one of the secretaries print it out.”

How do you suppose Fred felt about this?

How enthusiastic do you think Fred would be about his boss's next assignment?

*Case Two: The Uncommunicative Manager*

Jane Moran had worked for the Company for 20 years. She was regarded as an excellent employee, and her performance appraisals had been uniformly in the top 10%.

Six months ago she was transferred into a new department. She performed at her customary high level. However, she missed the feedback that she had had from previous managers, so one day she cornered her boss in his office and said, “How do you feel about my work? Am I filling your expectations? Is there anything else I should be doing?”

The manager said, “I don't give attaboys.”

“I wasn't asking for attaboys,” she said hotly. “I just wanted to know if I'm performing up to your expectations.”

“If you don't,” he said, “I'll be the first to let you know. Let me put it to you this way: if you don't hear from me, you'll know you're doing okay.”

“But — “ she started to say, but he cut her off.

“Here, take this quarter,” he said, flipping her a coin. “Take it into the next room and pop it in the slot in the wall. A big mechanical arm will come out and pat you on the back. Automation. In the meantime, count yourself lucky that you got your paycheck. That's why people work — for the paycheck. If you got your paycheck, that's enough feedback for you.”

What attitude has the boss created in the employee?

Do you think she will she work harder and better for him now?

One more case:

*Case Three: The Amorous Bookkeeper*

Larry Brown had been having a flagrant affair with one of the secretaries for several years. They used to sneak away together every afternoon for an hour or so. Everyone in the office knew about it but turned a blind eye.

The new boss (on her first managerial assignment) was informed of the situation.

“No way I'm going to rock the boat,” she told herself. “Besides, it's been going on for a long time. I'd just stir up trouble. Best to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Larry and his girlfriend laid low for a few days when the new boss arrived, but when nothing was said, they gradually started things up again. Pretty soon they were noticeably absent from their desks several times a week, and for longer and longer periods.

The new boss wished she had spoken to the lovers at the first opportunity, but now that she had given the appearance of condoning the affair, found it very hard to say anything.

Do you think that the boss's failure to communicate her wishes to Larry and his girlfriend has cost the company anything?

*Who will win the court case if Larry is fired?*

These three cases are typical examples of communication failures. The managers had good job knowledge, held university degrees or had lots of experience, and knew how to interpret spreadsheets and run computer models. They could make good business decisions and make money for the company. Yet they failed to communicate with staff on a basic level. As a result they will suffer consequences quite out of keeping with the degree of severity of the situations.

Communications are the life blood of all organizations. Poor communications can destroy good work and high motivation: good communications can motivate staff and enhance their performance.

## The communications model

There are three locations in the traditional communications network. There is the SENDER (in this case the author, Terry Barker, sending you information, ideas, biases, prejudices: there is the MEDIUM (the printed page or the computer screen): and there is the RECEIVER (you, the reader). All three locations are fraught with peril.

Let's examine them.

1. The Sender

*HE: Meet me at the south door of Sears at five.*

*SHE: Okay.*

But they didn't meet, because there are three south doors to Sears. He waited at the south-east door, and she at the south-west, for forty minutes. Then they checked the other possible doors, missing each other as they did so.That's a Sender error of omission: information was left out.

Here's another Sender error:

*BOSS: All right, men, today you're going to be assembling the frammis on the wackdoodle framework. Any questions? (LOOKS AT HIS WRIST WATCH).*

*CREW: Naw.*

*BOSS: Okay, away you go.*

There are three major *sender* errors here.

The first one is that his information was incorrect. He should have said “lugbots on the frampits” instead of “frammis on the wackdoodle”,but he got confused.

The day's work will all have to be done again, and the boss will lose his temper and blame his crew (none of whom had the foresight to record his instructions). They will smart under the injustice, and one of them will put sugar in his gas tank.

The second error was much worse. Instead of looking at the crew for body language clues that they failed to understand, he looked at his wrist watch — an action which told them he was in a hurry and they should get on with the job.

The third one was fatal. The boss was demonstrating an attitude which translates as, “Don't ask any questions, because if you do you'll be sorry.”

You learned about this in grade school. Remember? The teacher gave a lecture and then (looking at her watch) said, “Are there any questions?”

And you asked one.

“Well,” the teacher said (looking at her watch again), “I explained all that at the beginning of my talk, but I guess you just weren't listening. So we'll just keep everyone in for a few minutes at recess while I answer your question.”

Remember what happened to you on the playground at recess?

We all learned in school that asking questions is dangerous. As adults, we still are reluctant to display our ignorance in front of our peers. So when the boss says, “Are there any questions?” we don't ask, even if we failed completely to understand. We can always take our chances and ask the other guys later.

(Besides, who wants to be in the situation where, when you do admit ignorance, the boss says, “Well, what is there about it that you don't understand?” — and you are so dumb that you can't even say what it is you didn't grasp?)

You should ask yourself: Is my information correct? Did I read the right books? Could my memory be faulty? How about that headache I woke up with this morning? My prejudices against the ethnic of the week

*2. The Medium*

Are we trying to converse in the middle of a jackhammer convention? Does Number 14 machine make it hard for us to hear each other? Is there a streaker in the room? A siren outside the window? Is the phone hooked up right, and is the message garbled, and how would you know if it was, anyway?

*3. The Receiver*

Let's say that the Senders in both of our conversations above managed to clean up their act and give correct and complete information. Will that ensure accuracy?

The onus for accuracy is on the listener.

That means that however clever and complete a communicator the Sender is, if the Receiver isn't listening you have a failure.

*FATHER.Billy, your baby sister is only three days old. You mustn't put your dirty fingers in her mouth.*

*BILLY.I hate you, Daddy.*

*FATHER.She's just a little baby, you're her big brother now, you have to help look after her.*

*BILLY.I want a cookie.*

Billy is three, and having problems of his own dealing with the lousy little interloper who's taking all his parents' attention away from him. He tunes his father out. No matter how carefully Daddy explains it all, Billy's not going to listen.

*MANAGER: We have a problem with distribution in the Mid-West. Our product isn't getting on the shelves fast enough, and we're not getting much visibility. Maybe we need a new distributor. Check it out, will you?*

*EMPLOYEE: Sure.*

The manager doesn't know that the employee's wife has just informed him that she is moving in with her boyfriend. She left him the kids but she took all the furniture. He has just come to the sudden realization that she's probably cleaning out their joint bank account right this minute, and he's frantic to get to a phone and call the bank.

A week from now, when the manager asks him for his recommendations about a new distributor in the Mid-West, he's going to say, “What distributor?”

Now it's your turn. How are your prejudices? Have you checked your hearing lately? Are you thinking about lunch instead of what you're reading? Wax in your ears? Wax in your brain?

The truth is, the onus is on the receiver. You can send the clearest messages in the world but if your listener is mentally lolly-gagging not much decent communication is going to happen.

So the real point here is how can I learn to listen better? And the other side of that coin is, how can I get others to listen to me better?

## Participative listening

We can listen better to people by participating in the communications process. When we take part we pay attention, we stay awake, and we have a better chance to get it right.

Although the onus for accuracy rests with the Receiver, the Sender has the power to create a safe relationship.

It's the receiver's responsibility to make sure s/he has understood the message correctly.

That can be difficult or even impossible if the employee is shy or sensitive and the boss is domineering or overbearing.

So it's up to the Sender to ensure that the Receiver feels safe enough to admit ignorance.

There are two techniques to enhance communication between boss and subordinate. The first of these is:

*1. Encourage The Receiver To Ask Questions.*

Go back to the example in which the Boss tells his crew to assemble the frammis on the wackdoodle framework.

If he wanted his staff to ask him questions, he might have said this:

*BOSS: Today's work is going to be more complicated than usual, so I know you'll have questions for me when I've finished with the instructions. You have to assemble the frammis on the wackdoodle framework. John, you usually have a question.*

*JOHN: Yeah, I didn't quite get that bit about assembling the frammis on the wackdoodle. We've been, uh, working on lugbots and frampits....*

*BOSS: Did I say frammis? Oops! I meant to say, assemble the lugbots on the frampits. Hey, thanks, John. My mistake. Let's kick it around some more. Ed — how will you go about putting the lugbots in the right positions?*

What the boss did differently this time was to state his assumption that there would be questions, and that questioning is a reasonable and usual activity. This made it safe for John to ask.

The boss also primed the pump by making it easy for John to start off.

Note too that he rewarded John for asking his question. Those listening unconsciously picked up the fact that the boss listens.

The other technique to improve communication is:

*2. Encourage the Receiver to Check with the Sender for Accuracy.*

Giving feedback lets the Sender discover what the Receiver thinks s/he heard. Mirror and paraphrase! Once you get into the feedback habit, you'll be surprised to discover just how often what people hear isn't even close to what was sent.

Let's rewrite the Daddy and Billy dialogue:

*FATHER: Billy, your baby sister is only three days old. You mustn't put your dirty fingers in her mouth.*

*BILLY: I hate you, Daddy.*

*FATHER:(HUGGING BILLY) Now just to make sure that you heard me, tell me what I said.*

*BILLY: I want a cookie.*

*FATHER:I know you do, and we'll have a cookie together in just a minute. But first, see if you can tell me what Daddy said.*

*BILLY: I don't know.*

*FATHER: Okay. I said not to put your fingers in her mouth. Now, can you say that back to me?*

*BILLY: I'm not supposed to put my fingers in her mouth.*

*FATHER: Good boy! And why aren't you to put your fingers in her mouth?*

*BILLY: Because — because — she's little!*

*FATHER: What a clever boy you are!*

This takes a lot longer, but it works better.

Now let's re-write dialogue between the manager and his abandoned employee:

*MANAGER: We have a problem with distribution in the Mid-West. Our product isn't getting on the shelves fast enough, and we're not getting much visibility. Maybe we need a new distributor. Check*

*EMPLOYEE: Sure.*

*MANAGER: Just to make sure we're on the same wavelength here, tell me how you plan to go about this.*

*EMPLOYEE: Huh?*

*MANAGER: You seem a bit distracted. Is anything wrong?*

Asking the employee to tell him how he plans to perform the task is an excellent way to get the other person to feed the data back. In this case, the manager will quickly discover that there is a severe personal problem, and switch into a counselling mode.

**Body language**

If you nod your head and engage in direct eye contact, you will be more likely to understand what the other person is saying. Besides, it's very encouraging when someone nods and looks at you with interest.

Try putting your body into congruence with other people (deliberately mimic their posture and stance. If they fold their arms, you fold yours. People who are in similar postures can communicate more easily). Open your posture to be non-threatening and not defensive.

**Special techniques**

These ideas are good for all kinds of communications problems. But there are some special situations which seem to demand unusual techniques.

1. Intimacy

When you spend a great deal of time with a significant person such as a spouse or family member, the chances for misunderstanding are greatly multiplied. It's a good idea to sit down with such a person from time to time and review your relationship in terms of communications. You could ask some questions, such as: “Am I listening to you the way you want me to?” And, “Is my love for you coming across OK?”

You can also make deals. Do this when you're both feeling good and your minds are cool. Try for the “Second Chance Arrangement”.

Say, “Listen, Bill, when we get into fights, it's usually because we didn't understand each other. If I fight you, I want it to be for something real! So from now on if I say something and you don't react the way I thought you would, I get the chance to revise it and say it again.”

2. Emotional People

When the other person is in the grip of a strong emotion, such as fear or rage, and it's too powerful to ignore, your best bet is to let it pour out. Give permission to express those feelings by speaking their name out loud: “George, you look really mad. What's up?” Or, “Bill, you look like you lost your last friend. Want to talk about it?”

It means you might have to act as surrogate target for anger directed at someone else for a while, but you can handle it, can't you? After all...you're the boss.

When they've finished yelling or crying, then you can invite them into a problem-solving mode by saying, “Well, now, what are you going to do about all this?” And off you go!

To sit quietly and listen to someone's problems is an act of love and benevolence. It also happens to be good business, and isn't that a splendid coincidence?

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This concludes the first part of my series on managing in the new millennium. I invite you to try my other books – How to Talk to Your Staff, and How to Conduct the Management Interview. Good luck and please stay in touch with your own stories and advice. I’m always interested – always the teacher, always the student.

[How to Talk to Your Staff](http://www.amazon.ca/talk-your-staff-Boss-Talk-ebook/dp/B00ABL1K52/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195588&sr=8-1&keywords=how+to+talk+to+your+staff+terry+barker)

[How to Conduct a Successful Management Interview](http://www.amazon.ca/Management-Interview-Boss-Talk-ebook/dp/B00ABN2H16/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195649&sr=8-3&keywords=communications+terry+barker)

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