

Getting on the Same Page

by Helene Mazur

"The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place." - George Bernard Shaw

In business (family and other), it is not uncommon for a communication gap to go on for a very long time without being addressed. People are often reluctant to face a communication problem head-on, and often may not even be aware that poor communications are the hidden root cause of some other business problem. If we are out of sync with our business partners or colleagues, and we choose not to discuss our differences, the business can, and usually *will*, suffer.

When complacency sets in or when we try to ignore a problem, hoping it will go away on its own, no matter how well we try to camouflage the issue and keep things looking "normal" on the surface, we stop maximizing our potential, and the potential of the business.

If the ongoing challenge of business is to figure out how to compete in a constantly changing landscape, the solution requires a commitment to a continuous dialogue between the key parties to determine how to leverage strengths and maximize opportunities - and to cope with individual communication styles.

Successful organizations are willing to ask tough questions (and to hear tough answers) and foster collaboration to determine optimal solutions. No matter how smart and independent we are, it is pretty much impossible to succeed over a sustained timeframe by ourselves. The art of strategically combining resources, skills and thinking enables us to stand out in a competitive marketplace.

Communicating for effective transition

Communication issues are often magnified in a transition situation, which is why the healthy existence of any business requires both a succession plan and good succession management.

A succession plan requires the right candidates and addressing a myriad of financial and legal issues, but the transition itself requires great communication. Even capable candidates will fail unless there is an open and productive dialogue taking place.

For example, in a family business where a parent is developing a child to take over, or in a non-family business where an owner is trying to delegate in order to free themselves up to focus on business development, it is common to hear (above or below the surface) the following:

Successor: "How can I ever grow if you don't delegate?"

Owner: "You're inexperienced. You don't understand what it took to develop this business."

Successor: "I'm supposed to be in charge, but every time there is a problem, you get

involved."

Owner: "Of course I want to stay involved; it's my business at risk."

New ways of looking at an old situation can be a breath of fresh air and help a business evolve, but are often discounted due to thinking such as, "You don't really understand the business, the customers, the market, etc." People sometimes have a knee-jerk reaction when a change is suggested, no matter how innovative, to "the way things have always been done here." They get attached to a particular routine or to doing something in a way that worked well in the past, and tend to want to stick with what used to work - especially if "what worked before" was their idea or innovation in the first place.

For owners who have created and grown their businesses, the company represents a lifetime of financial and emotional effort. Taking a step back or accepting a new way of doing something can be a difficult task. Sons, daughters or key employees who are motivated and able become frustrated during the transition process. The parent's or owner's uncertainty may be interpreted as a lack of trust or respect. When the people involved in a transition find it difficult to communicate in a constructive way, it makes the transition process that much more painful for everyone who works in that business.

In any organization, how does an owner/leader effectively transition his or her skills, knowledge and experience to someone else, while encouraging their growth? How can you "let go" as a business leader or owner, and still feel confident that the organization will continue to grow and thrive in new ways without your constant participation or supervision? Strategic planning is the key.

Strategic Planning to Get on the Same Page

Even at a time when I did not fully understand the transition challenge, and quite by accident as a strategic planning facilitator, I observed the strategic planning process to be effective in opening doors of communication that have been locked for years!

Any effective transition plan or work environment must recognize and accommodate the needs, goals and objectives of the organization at large, as well as those of each individual team member. Strategic planning is an IDEAL way to discuss these needs, differences, and strengths. In order to optimize products, services and positioning, strategic planning requires new perspectives. Strategic planning is a proven method to help everyone get on the same page while setting up a business to thrive in a sustainable way.

With the commitment to create the time, the space and the right processes to work together strategically, something magical begins to happen. Everyone involved in the process starts to communicate. Once differences are put on the table, new ideas and creative thinking begin to thrive. The ice is broken. Discussions about market data, resources, trends, and dreams for the future begin to come together in new strategies for the future.

If you are thinking, "It could never happen with the players in *my* business", it is probably necessary to bring in an experienced facilitator. With a neutral party

facilitating a discussion, people are less likely to hold on to their resistance to new ideas, and more likely to open up with ideas of their own.

Seasoned facilitators help participants express themselves, and get heard in a respectful, trusting and effective manner. Everyone has equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion and process, and everyone works together to create ideas and make decisions. A skilled facilitator can guide the group to arrive at optimal solutions by starting with a diverse set of thinking. The breadth and differences in thinking are what make the planning process so rich.

The result of strategic planning is better decisions and solutions, and a renewed commitment to work towards a common vision by turning ideas into action. There is no better way to pave the way to transition, or open the locked doors of communication.

Helene Mazur is the President of Princeton Performance Dynamics. As a business coach and team facilitator Helene helps individuals and organizations look at their situation from new perspectives, strategize, focus, and take action to achieve goals that are important to them. Princeton Performance Dynamics specializes in strategic thinking and planning, new business development and growing leadership. Results often include organizational alignment, improved communications and increased productivity. Complimentary 30-minute coaching calls are available by appointment; simply call 609-924-9399 to arrange a convenient time. For more information go to www.ppdbusinesscoaching.com or email hmazur@ppdbusinesscoaching.com .