



April 30, 2013

HUFF
POST BUSINESS

CANADA 

The Woman With the Hammer

Posted: 10/17/2012 4:09 pm

You know the saying, "To the man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail?" It came to mind last week when I was at the Working Mother Work Life Congress, an annual conference built around the release of the magazine's famous "100 Best Companies" list. Sure, people were there to talk about work-life, but as a communications professional, everything I heard seemed to be about communication.

It's not surprising, really, because ultimately a lot of what makes work engaging and doable for people who have lives outside of it comes down to good communication. Since it's National Work and Family Month, let me show you what I mean:

When keynote speaker Beverly Kaye, Founder and Co-CEO of Career Systems International, spoke about employee development, a lot of what she had to say was a case for more communication. Kaye was referring to spoken communication between managers and those they manage, but many of her comments could also apply to the ways companies communicate to employees, in general (or don't).

Take her "five myths" that prevent managers from talking with employees about their careers. At least three of these (paraphrased below) are widely used by senior leaders in companies as an excuse for not sharing crucial information with employees:

- *If I open the discussion, it will be a Pandora's Box.* (The truth is, your employees are talking about it already. You're not releasing anything into the world that isn't already there. You're just bringing it out into the open and providing yourself with a chance for input.)
- *Employees own their own careers -- it's not my job to give them the answers.* (The truth is, employees don't generally expect definitive answers -- they just want support and information.)
- *I can't deliver on their desire to move up the career ladder, so talking about it will just lead to disappointment.* (The truth is, not everybody aspires to move up. Employees want jobs they care about -- "meaning is the new money," as Kaye says. Translated to more general employee communications: Don't second guess what your audience wants to hear. Be open in what you say and be open to hearing what they say, too -- what they want and need might surprise you.)

In a break-out session, Suzanne Vickberg, senior manager for inclusion at Deloitte, spoke about data forensics -- specifically, how to use data about your workforce to tell a story that demonstrates the value of work-life programs to leadership. Here (again paraphrased) are some of the points she made:

- Most companies already collect data about their employees. **By connecting these data in thoughtful ways, you can tell a strong story.** For example, connect data from last year's talent survey to current attrition rates -- how do what employees said about their work-life balance correlate with whether they're still with the company a year later? Through an analysis like this, Vickberg's team was able to show leadership at Deloitte that addressing employee concerns about work-life fit had six times the impact on retention as addressing concerns about pay.
- **Numbers don't mean much in isolation.** Find ways to bring them to life. By way of example, Vickberg showed a chart that used proportionately-sized dots to illustrate the dramatic difference in effect on turnover among a variety of factors. A small thing -- but a big effect on communication.
- **Speak the language of your audience.** For example, if you're reporting to leadership in finance, talk about the relative cost to the business of providing work-life policies and programs and losing employees.
- **Understand what will and will not be heard.** If you are addressing the problem of workload, recommendations that workload simply be reduced are unlikely to go very far. But you can probably use the same data to show how much better employees are able to manage their workload when they have control over where and when that work gets done.
- **Respect your data** -- it might not always tell the story you expect it to tell, but chances are it does have something to say.

Finally, keynote speaker Patrick O'Neill, president of Extraordinary Conversations, introduced the "Rule of 13." Describing the vital role clear communications play in strong leadership, O'Neill said leaders should be able to state the vision

behind any initiative in 13 words or less -- and the statement should be "understandable to your teenager."

For example? There's the head of an entertainment company whose 12 words -- "One of every five CDs sold will be sold in our stores" -- helped take his company from \$28 million to \$200 million in three years.

There's the Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation, which laid it on the line in five: "Conquering cancer in our lifetime." (Admittedly, this one begs the question: "whose lifetime?")

And then there's another guy you might have heard about, who said, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade."

Hmmm... wonder how that one turned out?

Robin Hardman is a writer and work-life expert who helps companies put together the best possible "great place to work" competition entries and creates compelling and easy-to-read benefits, HR and general-topic employee communications. Her award-winning blog about writing for corporate communicators can be found at www.robinhardman.wordpress.com; see www.robinhardman.com for information about her services.

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