Is your organization stifling upward communication?

Here are common ways that an internal culture stanches the flow of vital information from workers on the front lines. Do these sound familiar?

By Dianna Booher | Posted: April 7, 2016

The CEO and the CFO sat in opposite corners of the room. Each stuck a hand into the air when I called for questions at the end of my speech.

"*Why don't employees communicate upward in an organization?*" the CEO asked, with a tinge of frustration. The CFO added, " *My question exactly!*"

It's a common question—from even the best-liked and brightest leaders in and out of the boardroom—and it deserves serious thought, because when downward communication dominates, problems typically go unaddressed and innovation stalls.

Eventually poor internal communication shows up to the customer as poor service or defective products.

So, let's look at the root causes:

1. No system

Some organizations *say* they want employees to give feedback; to pass along ideas for new products or services, cost-cutting ideas and flagrant policy violations; and to let senior managers know how to improve things in general.

That's only in theory, though—or at least, that's the way it sounds to employees. No quick, easy system is in place to communicate those ideas anonymously.

Such a system doesn't have to be elaborate. If you're running a small business, you as the leader can just make it clear that you are comfortable with responding to email.

Another option is to gather feedback through free or paid survey software. Still another is to have a supplier collect suggestions through its email server and feed them back to you anonymously.

2. Lack of response

Some people try to communicate upward once or twice and then give up because they never get a response to their idea.

They feel their feedback or suggestion gets sucked into a black hole and never gets serious consideration. As a result, they think, " *Why bother again?*"

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3. Slow response

A timely response—whether positive, neutral or negative—says someone has considered the idea or feedback; a slow response equals no response.

So, what's the definition of "timely"?

Various customer service satisfaction surveys suggest that 88 percent of customers expect to receive a response to their email inquiry within 24 hours. Another 12 percent expect a response within an hour.

Compared against this prevailing expectation, how does the timeliness of your internal responses to team members measure up?

4. Fear

Some people don't communicate with the boss for fear of reprisal about bad news.

Also, a common habit for some leaders is to assign the person who points out a problem the task of wrestling that problem to the ground.

Who needs another extra-curricular assignment if you're already working at peak capacity?

5. Accountability

Closely associated with fear, accountability keeps some people mum.

If they don't share their numbers, goals or metrics, their boss can't hold them accountable or ask them what went wrong.

Keeping others—particularly the senior team—in the dark about plans and current problems means staying off everybody's radar screen.

6. Parental culture

Some organizations have created a parental mentality—either by the leader or the employees.

The leader might act like Mom or Dad: *"You kids don't worry about things. We'll take care of the important things for you. Just do your job, and we'll handle the rest."*

In other organizations, the employees have created that culture through their actions or lack of initiative, in effect saying: *"That's not my job. I'll just go play over here. I'm sure you'll let me know if I need to pay attention to anything else or change anything."*

Whatever the reason people don't communicate upward in an organization, the results remain virtually the same: distrust, disengagement and stagnation.

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