

# Coaching BP's IT managers to be better communicators

Developing a training approach to tackle face-to-face communication at the line-manager level

BY KATHLEEN ROJAS

Recognizing the value of line managers when it comes to internal communication prompted BP's IT function to look at how well equipped its managers were to do this effectively. Investigation turned up a familiar story of dull presentations and round-robin e-mails. Here, Kathleen Rojas explains the company's quest to improve internal communication with some unusual – but ultimately very effective – techniques.

Imagine this. It's nine o'clock on a spring morning and in a hotel meeting room around 20 senior IT managers are sipping coffee and catching up with colleagues, before taking their seats to listen to a presentation on good internal communication.

There's a call for quiet as the facilitator welcomes them, runs through some house-keeping points and safety notices, introduces himself and turns to give his first PowerPoint slide. He then works through bullet points on the learning objectives of the day. And so the presentation proceeds.

So far so conventional, until the facilitator exclaims "Right, this is actually boring *me* now!" He then invites the participants to gather in the center of the room. Among the participants, amusement and then a palpable feeling of relief follow shock and surprise. Finally the workshop begins in earnest.

This spoof beginning captures what BP set out to achieve: to help managers break out of the conventional and dull communication habits that take hold in the corporate world.

## Continual and unpredictable change

But first some background. During times when change is continual and often unpredictable, when there's an increasing need to retain and engage talented staff, effective communication by managers throughout the organization is more important than ever. This is true for BP and I'm sure it's true for any other organization, no matter how big or small.

Yet the tongue in cheek exposition of the horribly familiar dry-as-dust, one-sided performance at the lectern shows how easily even tried and trusted communication tools can fail to engage and inspire an audience. And this very familiar but often very ineffective style of communication was something that senior management at BP's Digital & Communications Technology (DCT) department was determined to avoid when seeking to improve internal communication and employee buy-in.

## Improving employee engagement

There's an incontestable business case for improving the quality of line-manager communication and we decided in DCT to do something about it.

"Research into employee engagement shows that the belief that the organization acts with honesty and integrity, is one of the main drivers of 'discretionary effort'," says James Brooke of Threshold, the niche agency we used to help us tackle face-to-face communication at the line-manager level. "So, whether our people continue to buy into our true values is a real performance issue."

BP is one of the largest energy companies in the world. Its Digital & Communications Technology department consists of over 3,000 employees and contractors across 50 countries. They provide IT and telecommunications support to almost every aspect of the company's operations.

Our facilitator, Peter Nicholas, also challenged business people about some of the unhelpful conventions that influence the way people communicate in large organizations. By combining his experience as a psychologist and acting coach, we wanted to really challenge some deeply embedded habits and beliefs governing communication in an IT function.

The evidence is inescapable: As sources of information, immediate line managers are the chief influencers and opinion leaders in the business. Evidence also shows that messages received from immediate line managers are most likely to affect employees' levels of engagement. Ensuring that managers had the tools to communicate effectively with their teams was obviously more essential than ever.

### Assessing a cross section of IT employees

However, like most line managers, managers in the IT function were at best pretty average communicators. This is par for the course with most organizations, where this aspect of the line managers' role is often scarcely invested in, or emphasized.

In my experience, so often the internal communication department ends up sidestepping the challenge of helping line managers to become truly effective communicators. The result is that communication tends to follow the path of least resistance. But we wanted the managers in the IT department to really rise to the challenge.

Our first step was to ask a cross section of IT staff to assess the communications they received in a typical two-week period. They told of a plethora of PowerPoint, a preference for e-mail rather than face-to-face or even phone conversation, a mass of acronyms and jargon and, perhaps most importantly, very little thought about developing messages that work for the receiver as well as the sender.

The pattern we observed was arguably typical of the way people communicate in the offices of any large corporation. But we were determined to act. And the issue we were most determined to tackle was face-to-face communication.

### Avoiding consultant fatigue

So our aim was clear – and with memories of dull presentations in our minds, we knew we had to take a fresh approach to emphasizing the importance of more engaging communication techniques. We were also aware that our managers are very busy people who regularly undergo training sessions based on all kinds of skills and disciplines. So this session would have to be something that really stood out, that made a lasting impression.

We recognized the benefits of using outside

support, but we were also aware of the risk of what could be termed “consultant fatigue”. So we were adamant that this intervention shouldn't be something that is “done to us” by consultants.

Instead, with something this important and fundamental, we knew it had to come from within the organization as we wanted to retain ownership of the overall program. This was seen as essential for ensuring that its lessons were put into practice after the main event was over and the consultants had left.

It was decided that we would only bring in specialist help for discrete parts of the program, those that are best delivered by specific facilitators who can contribute by virtue of being outsiders. This meant that the delivery of a “master class” in the form of a live workshop was one thing that could not be delivered by our own people. If you're going to shift the communication culture, you need to do something different that has genuine impact.

### Putting planning to the test

After a tender process, we engaged Threshold Communications to deliver a series of “Leaders as Communicators” master classes. The focus was to employ a mix of psychologists and professional performers as well as adapt some techniques from the field of Cognitive Behavioural Theory, to help managers develop self-awareness and techniques to replace unhelpful habits with more productive ones.

“If you want people to think, feel and communicate differently, you can't do it remotely,” says James Brooke. “You have to be prepared to work with them directly on a personal level. And as most of these people have had plenty of corporate communication training, if you want to capture their interest, you need to have the courage to do things differently. The



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**James Brooke** is a director of Threshold Communications, an organization dedicated to helping individuals, teams and companies communicate and perform more effectively.

## KEY POINTS

- When organizational change is continual and often unpredictable, there is always an increasing need to retain and engage staff.
- BP's IT function is tackling engagement by coaching managers to communicate in a way that is more personal and authentic.
- The approach encourages managers to opt for face-to-face communication wherever possible, rather than e-mail or formal presentations.
- The training combines communication techniques developed from business psychology as well as the theater.
- An important outcome of BP's two-day “master class” has been to raise managers' confidence in their ability to be good communicators.

◀ learning experience must be different, stimulating and provocative. It's a high-risk strategy, but our very early evidence is beginning to suggest that it pays off."

#### **Helping managers to build confidence**

Techniques used by professional actors were used to increase personal impact, develop "presence" and manage levels of confidence. Many managers discovered that managing their own level of confidence has an immense impact on their communication – and ultimately on the performance of their teams. Confidence, our

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participants discovered, is something they could teach themselves and then reactivate as necessary during their working lives.

In a competitive corporate environment, where few admit weakness, few people will confess to needing help with building their confidence. But in the feedback many managers told us that this element of the program would be a gift that they would always carry with them.

The emphasis of the two-day events has been very much about “doing” rather than being told. It was important to move out of the “passive training” approach to that of facilitating participants through a process, during which those participants were challenged to draw out whatever works for them. We also felt that if the attendees were coaxed into making personal discoveries, those experiences would stay with them.

#### **Using theater to demonstrate engagement**

Early on in the course, those attending were invited to examine that most basic of communication tools – the story. The group looked at how the human brain is hardwired to understand and learn by stories.

They investigated the classic story structure – the dilemma or conflict and the road leading to resolution. From this, our managers began to understand how to use this fundamental aspect of the human experience to grab an audience; and to engage people in communication in the workplace just as you would outside the office.

In a “forum theater” participants observed a scene in which actors portrayed a manager in a meeting with staff. Afterwards, participants got

the chance to interview the characters in the scene – how did they feel the meeting went? Did they feel that they were listened to? What would have worked better for them?

They then coached the manager and the scene was replayed with an opportunity to hit an imaginary “pause” button. This allowed them to give further advice to the manager as the scene unfolded the second time round, this time with manager acting on advice from the team.

#### **Listening instead of talking**

Participants began to recognize the way in which, so often, we talk when we should listen and also how presentations can block inter-personal communication. They investigated how, as managers, they need to balance the consistency of corporate messages with being human and bringing messages to life at a local level. As in every part of the session, participants were prompted to discover the answers to these issues themselves.

Technology director, Ceri Carlill recalls: “At one point I gave a talk to other people in my break-out group. The facilitator asked them to stand with their backs to me and only turn around when I had actually convinced them of what I was saying. It was really disturbing at first, but one by one they turned round. It was a great mixture of thought-provoking exercises and useful little tips like that, which I’ve used since when talking to my team.”

Another exercise saw participants give a short presentation on a subject that a fellow manager felt passionate and enthusiastic about, such as a hobby or experience. Speaking convincingly about an issue not of their choosing enabled participants to develop tools to help them do what they have to do in real corporate life – put across someone else’s message with authenticity and credibility. They have to find in it something that genuinely connects with them and work from there.

#### **Importance of non-verbal communication**

Another part of the workshop looked at how a manager’s non-verbal communication, such as manner and body language, can have a profound effect on the audience.

IT manager and course participant Keith Bradley says: “The biggest item for me now is how I deliver messages as opposed to what the actual message is – focusing on the delivery of the words with confidence in what’s being said plus the non-verbal language that goes with it. I’m trying hard to make less use of PowerPoint, although it feels a little like I’m swimming against the tide.”

In keeping with the style of the class, at given moments participants were encouraged to make their own notes and to enjoy what’s known as a

“light-bulb moment”.

One such learning point for Neil Taylor, who took part in the Chicago Master Class, was a sensitivity to other people and their signals as the key to good communication.

“You need to pay attention to what’s happening in the room,” he says. “Are they engaged or resistant? Have they fallen asleep? Do we need to take a break? Do I need to try a different approach? Open questions get people to think through the problem. Almost effortlessly they focus on the issue from the perspective that you want.” But perhaps most encouraging is his comments about how this experience has helped: “People are getting much more from my meetings now and so am I.”

### Training is just the start

Only time will tell if we are genuinely succeeding in shifting the communication culture. These things are notoriously difficult to measure, but I feel passionately that we had to take action. We found that if you want to win the buy-in of line managers to new ways of communicating, you need to work directly and personally with them, and you need to make the experience feel palpably different.

The approach we took centers on the idea that the experience is just the start. Real change comes from the individual’s continued commitment to try new things until good habits drive out the ineffective ones. We encourage managers to share examples of new methods of communicating that they’ve used and what they’ve learned from the experience. From this, there’s strong anecdotal evidence that things are changing.

We’re also using a number of follow-up techniques to keep managers thinking about what they learned. There are monthly e-mail reminders and online support, including links to the BP library of recommended books and tools of communication best practice. Further to this, we’re considering some two hour “refresher” coaching sessions.

Really, it’s about keeping the sense of community – the social networking – going through a variety of traditional and new media channels and interventions. [scm](#)

## COACHING IN ACTION: THE MANAGER’S STORY

Charles “Chip” Brewer, 50, is innovation program manager at BP’s Digital & Communication Technology Department in Houston, Texas in the US.

“When my line manager first suggested I do this course, I was a bit skeptical. But from that first spoof presentation at the start of the day, I realized that this was going to be different – I think everyone in the room did. There was so much movement during the class – it was rare that we were in our chairs, and that kept us all involved and made sure that everyone could have some input while no one person dominated. We did an exercise in trust in which we closed our eyes and were led around the room by other people – that really struck me. I don’t know why, but it stayed with me.

“Having to design and deliver a presentation under pressure was more challenging than I was expecting. It really put you on the spot, but that was a good thing – it stretched you and the atmosphere was very supportive. I realize that I used to ramble a bit when I was doing presentations, but I learned to focus and now I’m better at leading people through what I’m saying, instead of expecting them to know what I’m talking about and keep up. Maintaining eye contact was one note I made to myself and I’ve always remembered it. Another is how to grab people’s attention by starting with a story, a question or a killer fact.

“Another big learning point for me was the use of silence. I’d never heard silence discussed in that way that before. But now I’ve learned the importance of giving the people you’re talking to some time to think about what you’re saying. That means they can give you some feedback and express their thoughts instead of you just going off on another point. I realize that silence is very powerful – the best speakers in the world use it to great effect.

“I was in a meeting with the COO recently to discuss a project I was doing for him and I was naturally very excited about it. But I realized that he was trying to give me a little steer on what he wanted and so I found myself using the silence trick we’d learned, to let him speak. It was about being silent and just letting the other guy talk – that was a very obvious application of what I’d learned.

“We also looked at ‘sin binning’ – the business of just damning someone you’re having trouble working with instead of trying to see things from their point of view. I’ve managed to use that on a colleague. He was antagonistic towards me, but then I realized that he was going through a lot of changes which might have made him feel nervous about the current situation. That helped our working relationship.

“I realize there are things I learned from the course that I’m now putting into practice in my everyday working life in an unconscious way – I’m just doing them without thinking about them.

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