

The bottom lines of communication

In short:

- A Gallup poll has revealed the shocking results of exactly how many people are actively engaged at work.
- Good communication is an investment and businesses are failing to recognise its worth.
- HR departments have become process driven machines and as a result, have detached themselves from those that need their help and are struggling to form relationships. Their 'transactional' approach needs to change to a more 'relational' one that people expect from such a department.
- Portals and email threads are getting in the way of effective communication between employers and their employees and customers. If this approach to their communication doesn't change to a 'relational' one, then they will see the consequences.
- It is becoming easy for businesses to 'alienate' their employees and customers with inappropriate communication. This can quickly lead to disgruntled employees openly criticising their own company.



Communication is key to any successful business. For Miti Ampoma, the nature of that communication is more important than people think. Not only does communication within business need to be taken more seriously, Ampoma believes that it needs to be turned on its head. Her point? To take process-driven 'transactional' dialogue back to an open and perceptive form known as 'relational' dialogue.

Communication specialist Miti Ampoma says we need dialogue to move from being 'transactional' to 'relational', as she tells Andrew Sawers

Talk is cheap. But good communication is an investment – and like any investment, it can generate a real return to the bottom line. Undercut that investment, and you damage your asset.

Miti Ampoma has spent many years in the communication business in organisations as diverse as Direct Line, Colt Technology Services and the BBC. She has also worked as a journalist, trained as an actress and even sliced tomatoes in Harrods. She has some forthright views that businesses are failing to recognise the worth of investment in communication. 'Communication as a skillset has become so undervalued,' she says. 'Everybody is on the bandwagon of digital transformation, but they pay lip service to invest in people.'

Ampoma is the author of *The Innovative Communicator: Putting the Soul Back into Business Communication* and the founder of Miticom, a specialist consultancy advising businesses on their communication strategy. It's quite different from being just another public relations firm – it's more about influence-training, says the woman known as 'the silver-tongue of persuasion'.

She pulls no punches: 'I'm going to call it out,' Ampoma says. 'My big problem about the lack of return on investment is that there is an elephant in the room: the nature of HR [human resources] has changed enormously and it's become very process-driven. Business runs its human beings as a transactional communication. We need to move away from the transactional to relational communication.'

Asked to explain the difference, she gives real examples that she has encountered. One bank manager she met told her that an edict had come down from head office:

'If we now want to talk to HR, we need to submit a question through a portal,' he told her. 'I'm a bank manager,' he added. 'Stuff is raining around my ears, I'm so stressed out. I just want to speak with somebody. HR has become the enemy: you just can't get to them,' he lamented.

'That's transactional,' says Ampoma.

She recalls another example, from when she was in a transformation role at a large company: she spotted a senior project manager who was looking somewhat unsettled. 'She was a very valued member of the team and her manager really relied on her,' Ampoma says. But she wasn't looking herself. 'If you ever need to chat...' Ampoma told her.

“Talk is cheap. But good communication is an investment.”

Some weeks later it transpired that the senior manager had had an operation on her back and was suffering in painful silence at work because of the 'sleeves rolled up' approach – literally, heavy-lifting – at a time when people were being made redundant and buildings shut down. If she couldn't get stuck in, she was afraid of losing her job. 'This is really serious. Your health is everything. Why don't you have a chat with HR?' I told her. 'Huh? They wouldn't even know who I was,' she said.'

Ampoma sought and got her permission to speak to the woman's line manager on a no-names basis and to explore how best to get a foot in the door in HR. 'I got them, in effect, into a collaborative mediation table.' They moved her into another role which was equally important but which didn't put a strain on her back.

'She was extremely happy because we needed to retain her. She told me that, without my intervention, she would have left the company.'

'In fairness to HR, once they knew they were very helpful,' Ampoma adds. 'But they never get to know [their employees] because they're busy sending out emails saying, "If you want to ask any questions, do it on the portal." How are they going to look into your eyes? How are they going to form this relationship?'

"You've got no communication plan?"

She recalls a typical, long meeting at another organisation, at the end of which Ampoma says, 'So, gentlemen [and it is usually men of a particular age and a particular ilk with all the "group think" that goes with that, she explains], if I could just sum up what you've said in the last two-and-a-half hours. You're saying that you're stripping costs, you have announced to your workforce that about 5,000 of them are going to lose their jobs in the next ten months, and you've also told them that they need to give 110% of themselves. But you've got no communication plan in place? Is that roughly where we are?'

In these very typical situations, HR is doing its best, she says, 'but they can't do it all. They don't have that change expertise of joining up all the dots – all those really nuanced dots. I understand the language of business analysts and project managers and can translate it into meaningful communication from Kelly at the customer service desk to the stressed-out middle manager to the ExCo. When you pull all of that together it makes a huge difference rather than just sending some email edict and asking people to cascade it.'

"Big business is finding it harder and harder to communicate in a way people understand – to both their employees and customers. And since it's people who generate value, if these businesses aren't talking to them in a language they understand, they are literally throwing away their value."

"efficiency alone will never be enough to 'move the dial' when it comes to a customer's satisfaction with their bank"

There is 'a huge disconnect between senior managers and the rest of the workforce', she says. 'They're just tinkering around the edges. And when the panic sets in, they suddenly decide, "We haven't been on an away weekend for absolute yonks!" Well, that weekend "sheep dip" isn't going to make the difference. The difference between what the CEOs and the ExCo think that the workforce and their customers want and what they actually need is now in need of radical surgery.'

Ampoma points to a Gallup poll that says only 13% of employees are 'actively engaged' at work. Another poll, from Deloitte suggests that more than 60% of next-generation and middle managers have no intention of staying more than 18 months in their business. 'Why? Because they believe the training budgets have been so cut that their interpersonal skills and communication skills in particular are suffering,' she says.

'The phrase "employee engagement" also needs radical surgery,' she argues.

Ampoma quotes a synopsis of a training course – a quote which is an example of how not to do it, she says. "'This is about understanding how engaging with the senior teams and building line manager capability connects employees with organisational goals and helps improve performance.'" If you were going on that course, would you be fired up?' she asks with a laugh.

'Employees don't need to feel engaged anymore: their eyes start to glaze over. They need to feel valued. If they felt valued then that would drive return on investment, because people will go beyond the bounds of duty. The ultimate goal here is a return on investment. We want to make money that is sustainable and keep the reputation of the business going.'

Connecting employees and customers

Sadly, she says, minimising reputational risk has become more important than focusing on communication for employees and customers – 'your two key stakeholders'.



As Ampoma puts it, it's a pretty simple formula – and it's not at all obvious why it shouldn't be this simple: 'Return on investment comes from this: look after your employees and they will look after your customers.'

Disgruntled employees, she says, will either treat customers badly to the extent that they'll go somewhere else, or they may even openly criticise their own company. One example is when on-train customer service people openly agree with passengers that their railway service is rubbish.

Shifting to a relational communication with employees and customers will go a long way towards being able to satisfy customer needs, Ampoma argues: 'The customer wants one of two things. They either want speed and convenience – and that's what somebody like Amazon does very well – or they want, ultimately, an emotional experience. And if you don't give them an emotional experience, they will vote with their feet.'

There's evidence to back up her argument. According to McKinsey research, it's widely recognised that technological change has transformed job requirements, but less well known that employment is growing fastest in 'smaller businesses requiring extensive human interaction'. The consultancy uses the phrase 'interaction talent' which, Ampoma says, effectively equates to her emphasis on relationships.

'People want an experience that makes them emotionally connected,' she says. 'That's why they're moving.'

And they're not just moving online: they're moving to smaller businesses where they can talk to human beings.'

Sadly, it is very easy for businesses to alienate their customers with inappropriate communications, such as when a well-known international high street food retailer, who was responsible for the death of a customer issued an apology letter that also made plain that the company had in fact operated within the law. 'That is so not okay,' she exclaims. 'That's not communication with integrity and heart.'

She has coined (and trademarked) the phrase 'innovative communication' to describe how the new models need to work. 'Industrial revolution 4.0 means that everyone must start thinking like an entrepreneur,' she says. 'That means you respect the corporate ethos of your company, but you must be able to do agility, flexibility and resilience in your thinking. You must be able to think outside the box and think on your own two feet.'

'It's not enough to put that in a PowerPoint presentation and get it cascaded down.'

When organisations talk about 'people, process and technology', Ampoma says that they are really talking about process and technology with people being simply an 'inconvenience'. 'Whereas, it should be about process and technology enabling the advancement of communication skills – and human beings must be at the heart of it. Communication must play its role for business to progress.'