

## BARKING AT THE TROOPS: LEADERS AND COMMUNICATION

Barking at the troops. Happens all the time. The boss wants to inspire his people, urge them to battle, lead them to victory. Coax them into making better widgets, sell more work, complete tasks on time and under budget.

She goes from meeting to meeting, giving her ten-minute pep talks. He takes a few softball questions. She tells everybody to send her an email if they have suggestions. He says he really wants to know what they think.

Those on the receiving end of the encounter are shaking their heads. What, they ask themselves? Really, they think? I know this guy who calls himself our leader means well, but what does his talk have to do with us? How am I supposed to respond?

A communications breakdown. Total disconnect. It's not that the leader didn't attempt to communicate, or the troops attempt to listen. It's that the message the leader sent didn't resonate. Because the content of the message sent meant little in the context of the troops on the ground. The interesting thing is that from the vantage points of both – the leader and the troops – the views of reality are reasonable and supportable. But neither triangle conveys the whole reality, according to Mel Toomey, founder of the Center for Leadership Studies.

CEO and C-suite view is very broad from the top looking down



Rank and file view is very broad from the bottom looking up

 = World outside the organization       = World of the organization



Look at the illustration of the intertwined triangles. The triangle with the point at the top represents the troops. The base is broad; that's where the troops live with the day-to-day issues of the shop floor. The troops' view is almost never from the top. The upside down triangle with the point at the bottom represents the organization's leaders. The base is broad at the top where the leaders live with all of the issues the company or organization faces in its industry and the wider world. The leaders never get the bottom perspective.

Taken together, you can see no one in the organization knows the whole of it – even in conceptual terms. And to the degree that the leader or troop member has a grasp of the whole, a large part of what they grasp can't be supported when observing the content, or, said another way, the facts of the matter. It's because both leaders and troops have different contexts, different lenses through which they view and analyze the facts.

Peer deeper into the world of the leader to look at what they deal with day-to-day. It's markets, geography, economies – the stuff CEOs must pay attention to if they're to make their organizations as successful as they need to be. The context is the reality of the external world. That's what gives meaning to his experience and his understanding of what's happening on the shop floor. On the shop floor meanwhile, the external world has comparatively less meaning. If the men or women in the trenches care at all about markets, they mean very little to them. Their concerns are about quotas, breaks, safety, where to refine processes, how to get the kids to day care and who will replace the boss when she retires in a few weeks.

What implications does this have for leadership? A leader looking out at the world sees the world is changing and his company must start making green widgets instead of red widgets. Or a services firm leader sees his troops must begin providing more expertise on oil and gas and less on alternative energy. And the organization needs to deliver the new direction at full capacity by the end of the quarter. The supervisor on the floor is thinking about the need for retooling equipment. The professional service provider is figuring out how to acquire the new intellectual property. He needs time to install it and shake it down.

When faced with the concerns from the bottom, the CEO says he doesn't need problems, he needs solutions. Bring me solutions! The truth of the matter is no one is paying attention to the context because everyone thinks the meaning is obvious. And one person's obvious is another's oblivious. Everyone comes to different conclusions.

The implications are that communications must have context. The leader must deliberately communicate where he's coming from in the language of context for the troops. He must translate his context into the context of others. And he must bear in mind that different contexts prevail at different levels of the organization.

Think about it this way. In terms of the organization's newsletter. One newsletter may not be enough. A handful of newsletters speaking directly to different parts of the organization could well be more effective. The facilities management department troops aren't likely to care if the financial



services people come up with a new angle to serve a client. But a separate publication aimed at the financial services people trumpeting the new angle will likely strike home.

Context is what gives meaning to content or, put another way, the facts. Meaning therefore varies even when facts remain consistent. When communicating across contexts, the communication must provide the meaning, the so what. So, leave as little as possible to chance in the communication. Instead be assertive about the so what, the implications, the purpose of the communication.

Be crystal clear about those assertions. Which means do the necessary thinking ahead to arrive at that clarity. If the thinking is muddy, the communication will be muddy, and the points won't come across.