Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H04XND
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MAY 03, 2019

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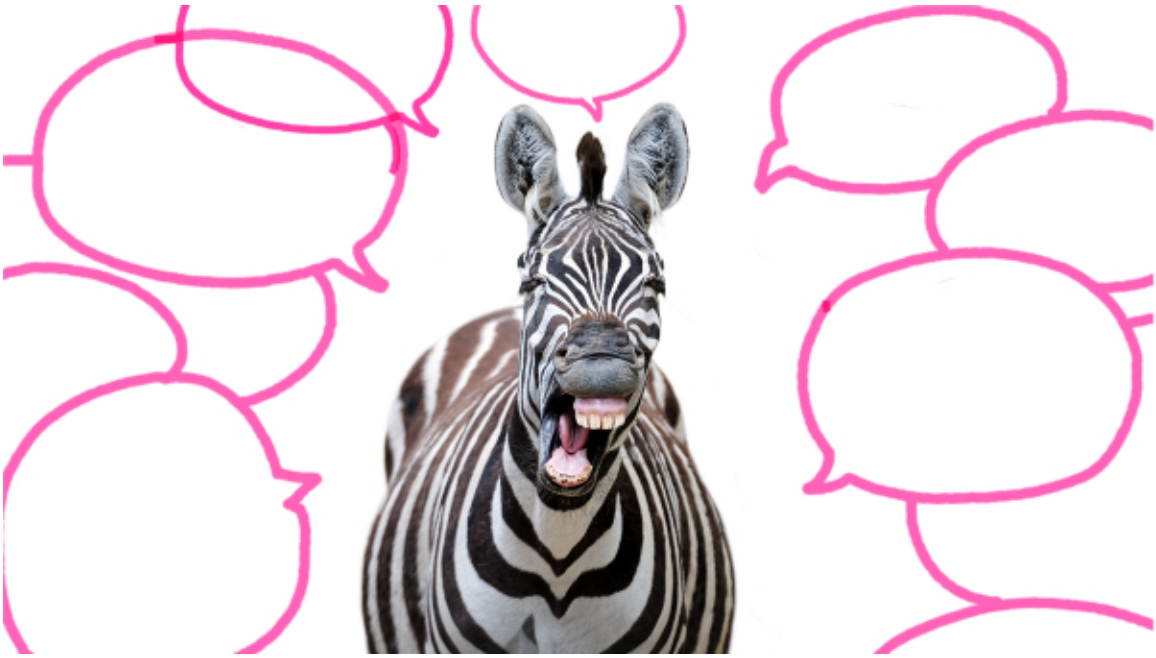

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As head of a startup, I always want to make sure everyone on my team understands the vision for what we’re trying to achieve. I also want to make sure we’re hearing, considering, and incorporating everyone’s ideas, and acting quickly to iron out problems along the way. So we have a lot of group conversations. *A lot*.

We discuss our mission, goals, and the steps it will take to achieve them. Every time, I look for new ways to say things, in hopes of making the vision crystal clear and discovering even slight differences in how various team members understand our goals.

In short, I over-communicate.

I don't just do this now, with a relatively small staff. I've done the same throughout my career, including when I spent several years as vice president of a large company in Newton, Massachusetts.

So I've had to ask myself: At what point am I communicating too much? When should I give it a rest?

The answer isn't simple. On one hand, HBR has reported on complaints from people about the kind of boss who "over-communicates with everyone on a project," creating "a huge time suck." On the other hand some research from Harvard finds that "persistent, redundant communication" from managers helps get projects completed quickly.

To toe the line, I've developed rules for myself to follow, aimed at mitigating the downsides (like wasted time and lost productivity) while still using frequent communication to clear any hurdles in our path.

Make it two-way

When you're trying to communicate your vision and organize the work ahead, it's easy to start speechifying. You have so much to say, so many thoughts on your mind, that you can get carried away. And since you're "the boss," other team members may feel a duty to listen and nod along. You can lose track of time.

So leaders should make sure to listen every bit as much as — if not more than — they talk. "Effective leaders don't just talk, they listen," Northeastern University reported. An HBR piece described listening as "an overlooked leadership tool."

As you hold meetings, keep tabs on how much time you spend talking, and how much listening. And when you get a question, sometimes invite other team members to weigh in as part of the answer. That way everyone is included, and feels that their input is valued.

Never interrupt "the zone"

When your employees are busy designing a solution or banging through tasks, it's not the right time to strike up a conversation with them. Short of an emergency, you shouldn't pull them out of "the zone," in which they're focused on crucial tasks. You also need to make sure there are sufficient uninterrupted periods of working time to allow people to find that focus. Breaking the work day up into multiple chunks by scheduling meetings is a sure way to kill productivity in any creative work environment.

That's why, as a rule, the ideal time for conversations is at the beginning of a work session or close to the end of the day — though not when they're supposed to leave. It's only worth having these sessions when everyone needed for them is available at the same time.

Monthly one-on-ones

To ensure that ideas and concerns are teased out and raised, every team member should have a one-on-one session with a leader once a month. In these meetings, the team members can voice anything.

To be sure they don't hold back, I ask employees to bring at least one "bad" issue to these meetings. It can be a concern about the product we're creating or the way our business is running. It can also include an idea for how to improve.

Of course, employees are also welcome to bring positive issues — things they're excited about and want us to do more of. But addressing problems takes precedence.

Beyond the open-door policy

I expect all leaders and managers to welcome any team member to discuss issues large or small. But as many experts have written, simply announcing that you have an open-door policy isn't enough. It's important to empower employees to speak up by showing them that when they bring concerns your way, you act on them.

One way to achieve this is through a "feedback loop." After a concern is raised, whether in a group meeting or one-on-one, follow up on it. Track progress, identify obstacles, and keep moving the effort forward. The more you do this, the more people will see the practical value of bringing up an issue — and they'll see what all the communication you're engaging in can achieve.

In general, avoiding lots of scheduled meetings and instead engaging in ad hoc conversations is better. And when meetings are necessary, bring good food, since meetings on low-blood sugar are an especially bad idea.

As a manager, you want to make sure everyone on your team understands the vision for what you're trying to achieve. But at what point are you communicating too much? When should you give it a rest? There are rules you can follow to mitigate the downsides of overcommunication (like wasted time and lost productivity). For one, listen as much, if not more, than you talk. And never interrupt "the zone." When your employees are busy designing a solution or banging through tasks, it's not the right time to strike up a conversation with them. Encourage your employees to have a one-on-one session with a leader once a month and ask them to bring at least one "bad" issue to these meetings. And finally, empower employees to speak up by showing them that when they bring concerns your way, you act on them. With all these efforts in place, and an atmosphere of psychological safety, it becomes much more likely that you'll do a good job of communicating frequently without annoying your team.

After all, in that environment they'll also feel much more comfortable to say: "You know what boss? I really think we've got it."

Hjalmar Gislason is founder and CEO of GRID.