

# 4 Critical Communication Basics

*Go after better results — and higher employee satisfaction — with these strategies.*

*by Kindra Gordon, field editor*

What frustrates employees most? It's lack of communication from their managers, according to an online survey of 1,000 U.S. workers conducted by Interact/Harris Poll. Specifically, the top complaint from employees was that employee achievements were not recognized by managers. The second highest frustration among employees came from managers not providing clear directions. Ranking third among the complaints was the feeling that managers did not make time to meet and communicate.

If these sound like small things, consider the theory of legendary basketball coach John Wooden: "It's the little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen."

Iowa farm wife Kathy Peterson, who also works as a human resource coach and speaking professional, couldn't agree more. She notes that without communication between manager and employees, it's extremely challenging to build better relationships and achieve better results. Thus, she offers these strategies for improving communication with employees and family members.

## **Identify your expectations.**

Peterson came to realize how important it is to share your expectations via her own "aha"

moment. Coming home late from her off-farm job one evening, she was extremely hungry, and she presumed her husband would have some supper waiting for her when she got home.

But when she arrived home, Peterson was upset to find that her hubby didn't have any supper prepared for her late arrival.

Peterson says her thought upon arriving home was: "How did he not know I would be hungry?" But after letting her anger subside, her "aha" moment came as she realized her expectation for supper had never been communicated to her husband.

These "unspoken expectations" are something Peterson says we all are guilty of — with family members and employees. She says, "What you may see or know, others may not see. So, sometimes we need to have conversations to gain perspective. If

we don't tell people what we expect, then we are expecting them to guess," and in the case of employees, that may mean we are paying them to guess at their jobs.

Thus, Peterson advises that communicating expectations is critical when working with others — family members or coworkers.

Peterson suggests it's helpful to consider the outcome that is wanted and then share that with the person you expect the results from. She notes, "As Stephen Covey said, 'Begin with the end in mind.'"

## **Offer feedback — both positive and corrective.**

In family and work settings, feedback is often provided when something was done incorrectly. But Peterson says, "We need to be better about acknowledging things that are done well, too."

She adds that providing feedback that shows appreciation or acknowledges good work may be motivating for the recipients as well. "We are all kind of like little kids. When we are told we did something well, often we want to do it again," she explains.

Additionally, Peterson advises managers to communicate feedback frequently. "Feedback should be regular and ongoing, not just a one-time event," she says.



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Regarding the popular mantra that “no news is good news,” Peterson disagrees. Instead, in the workplace she says, “No news is no news,” which comes back to unspoken expectations and leaving employees to guess how they are doing in their jobs.

**Take it to the source.** Peterson’s next piece of advice is to be direct and “talk to someone instead of about them.” She notes it’s easy to jump to conclusions and judge a situation based on hearsay and perception. Instead, Peterson advises: “Focus on facts.”

She gives the example of an individual showing up for work stomping their feet and crossing their arms. Rather than jumping to the conclusion that they are upset about something, she suggests stating the facts and asking an open-ended question by saying, “I see you’re stomping your feet and crossing your arms, what’s going on?” Then, gather information from their response and address the issue that they identify.

**No such thing as perfect.** Lastly, Peterson underscores that successful communication is about continuing to learn, listen and grow. “You must stay flexible, because nothing is ever perfect.”

Alan Hojer, a South Dakota farmer who now assists others with estate and transition planning, agrees. In working with farm and ranch families, Hojer frequently tells people, “If you’re looking for perfect, you may not find it.” Hojer is manager and legacy consultant of “Keep Farmers Farming,” a division of First Dakota National Bank.

Based on his own experience transitioning the first-generation farm he started to his son, Hojer says he has learned sometimes

his communication needs to step back in order to allow his son more opportunities for decision-making.

As an example, Hojer says, “History has given me many experiences, so it’s often easier for me to make decisions. But, when my son calls me for input, I ask him what he thinks and try to listen instead of jumping to provide an answer.”

He believes this is key to successful transitioning — growing people and helping them gain confidence in decision-making.

He concludes, “When I do have imperfect moments, I circle back and am willing to tell him, ‘I could have handled myself better.’” **AJ**