

Top-Down: Building a Better Organization Through Effective Communication

Reviewed by **KENDRA VAN NOSTRAN**

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How many quarterly CEO updates or employee newsletters have you received that failed in their attempts to motivate you, let alone provide a vision of where your organization is headed and the important role you play in moving the company forward?

In their book "The Leader as Communicator," former Fleishman-Hillard Inc. executives Robert Mai and Alan Akerson note early on, "Employees seem to have more things to say and more questions to raise these days, but it's still the leader's responsibility to make the decisions and live by the consequences."

Yet even in the face of irrelevant internal communication and an increase in dialogue among employees, many businesses still view communication from leaders as having only a minor role in organizational strategy. Mai and Akerson contend that successful companies lead through effective top-down communication, and they have set out to offer leaders a resource for improving their organizations' communication, primarily by taking responsibility for it.

Mai and Akerson have divided their book into four parts: The Agenda for Leadership Communication, The Leader as Community Developer, The Leader as Navigator and The Leader as Renewal Champion.

Part one defines leadership communication and examines the ways in which it can affect an organization. "Above all, leadership communication entails nurturing and maintaining a workplace environment in which communication flows freely and quickly in all directions with minimal distortion or lag time," Mai and Akerson write. "The leader of an organization is automatically the designated chief communication officer and is accountable for all communication in the organization—not only his or her own, but that of the entire workplace community."

Subsequent sections offer step-by-step tactics and strategies to help leaders become more effective

at organizational communication. Case studies are incorporated throughout the text.

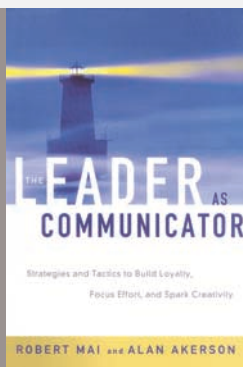
A case study of AlliedSignal Aerospace (now Honeywell Aerospace) underscores a core component of effective leadership communication that is all too often overlooked—being a good listener. From the outset, the company recognized the need for effective leadership from middle managers. It implemented a formal management training program to help steer managers through team communication challenges. Although various communication strategies were incorporated into the training, listening skills were deemed the central competence. Today, the company's middle managers credit their extensive training in listening as the communication strategy most responsible for furthering a connection between employees and management.

Communication leaders are most likely to find the chapter on "Setting Direction" of particular interest, as it focuses on tactics that can help leaders get what they want from employees: capturing and maintaining their attention, fostering workforce awareness and understanding, and persuading individuals to act.

Sections of the book that examine newer organizational communication trends will appeal more to communication practitioners. For example, the chapter on "learning advocates" delves into the concept of "learning organizations," those businesses and institutions that are "able to adapt to changing environments by rethinking or reinventing the rules for success." According to Mai and Akerson, this type of organization is possible only when the leader serves as a learning advocate, one who is committed to furthering organizational learning and continual process improvement.

Although some readers may question the need for another book on effective employee communication, others will recognize the importance of the subject as the service economy—which relies on human capital—continues to evolve.

Historically, CEOs have been responsible for managing a company's assets and its competitive position. Today, workers are the chief assets, and communicating with them effectively from the top down is central to building and maintaining an organization in the 21st century. **CW**



The Leader as Communicator: Strategies and Tactics to Build Loyalty, Focus Effort, and Spark Creativity

Robert Mai and Alan Akerson
AMACOM, a division of the American Management Association, ©June 2003
276 Pages