



Memos That Backfire: An Analysis Of A Manager's Memorandum

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Abstract

This article explores the problem of downward communication for managers by analyzing a supervisory memorandum directed to an airline's employees. (The names of the people and airlines involved have been changed.) The memorandum was posted on InternalMemos.com, a website for disgruntled employees to air inside memorandums from their company. Most downward communication in organizations is in written form since executives have limited face to face interactions with all employees. The memo exemplifies ineffective written communication as it misses the connection with its readers. Style, word choice, tone and length are analyzed as well as readability to show the memo suffers from weaknesses in several key areas. As strong leaders must have good communication skills, the article demonstrates that managers who fail to communicate effective with their employees exacerbate existing problems within the organization rather than solve them.

Introduction

Ever since the Hawthorne studies in the 1930's, organizational researchers have recognized the importance of communication in organizations (Weick and Browning, 1986). Early on, Barnard noted that effective leadership in organizations depends upon "communicators in communication positions" (1948, p. 2). Poor internal communication often contributes to dissatisfaction in an organization. When employees are unhappy, behaviors can manifest themselves in a myriad of problems including absenteeism and turnover. Crime occurs more frequently among unhappy employees. Bristol found that disgruntled blue collar workers were seven times more likely to steal from their employer than happy ones (1994). Good internal communication is a requirement for healthy organizations as organizational discourse helps establish the culture and binds people together. Managers with strong communication skills can help establish a positive, open organizational climate where information flows freely upward and downward within the organization. Those with weaker skills can seriously exacerbate company problems.

This paper presents an in-depth analysis of a supervisory memorandum directed to flight attendants as an example of mistakes managers must avoid when communicating with subordinates. Downward communication is typically problematic and characterized by message distortion, missing information and misinterpretation (Goldhaber, 1990, p. 156). Managers frequently struggle with downward communication due to layers of management and a lack of feedback. A study of downward communication problems experienced by hotel managers reported a lack of responses to the messages, content changes in messages as they flowed downward, and message distortion when the message was interpreted by the reader. In other words, the message communicated to subordinates was not taken in the same tone or in the context intended (Stevens, 1996). Context and tone also appear to have compromised and distorted the message sent by an airlines manager to his flight attendants.

The Internal Memo Goes Public

On March 30, 2004 one of Air Commander Airlines' regional managing directors sent an internal memorandum to 5000 flight attendants enumerating complaints from two of Air Commander's corporate customers (Appendix 1). Flight attendants in this large US corporation were warned that they were not doing a good job. According to the memo, corporate travel managers had complained about poor service and said Air Commander's travel and global schedules kept them coming back, not the service. Flight attendants were apparently angered by the memo, and quickly posted it on InternalMemos.com, a forum for disgruntled employees desiring to give company memos a public airing on the Worldwide Web (www.InternalMemos.com/memos/).

Described in the *New York Times* as a "deliciously subversive Web site" (Sharkey, 2004, C6), InternalMemos.com publishes hundred of memos that managers intend only for primary audiences within their companies. On May 1, 2004 the site reported it had posted 2162 memos on line by employees from US companies such as Adelphi, Bank of America, the US Army, Computer Associates, Cendant, AOL and IBM. Many memos address controversial, private issues, and hot topics such as the July 7, 2004 posting from an employee in the White House in Washington DC forbidding employees "to mention the name of Senator Kerry in the White House." (www. InternalMemos.com). Other memos are less interesting and simply air routine internal business.

Purpose of the Memorandum

Near the end of his memo, the manager writes, "My purpose in sharing this feedback with you is to solicit your help in changing this perception" (Appendix I, p.2); however, upon analysis of the memo's design, this statement seems doubtful. While the writer says he wants to solicit the readers' help, the manager does not suggest a forum to discuss the issues nor does he invite feedback from the flight attendants. The true purpose of the memo appears to be to criticize the flight attendants' behavior. If this manager is trying to motivate his employees, he needs to acknowledge their contributions and open the lines of communication. As written, the purpose of the memo seems to be to criticize behavior. Whether or not the criticism is deserved is not within the purview of this paper; rather this rhetorical analysis examines ways which the writer approaches his audience and attempts to achieve his purpose.

The manager's motives for writing the memorandum may have been complex involving secondary readers. [1] He may have been attempting to appease the sales department, key customers, or trying to show his managers that he was addressing a sticky problem with important customers. Nonetheless the memo was directed and sent to the primary audience—a group of flight attendants—and this analysis will focus on that audience.

An Overview of the Memorandum

With a length of 720 words and running one and half pages single-spaced, the Air Commander Airlines memorandum opens with four paragraphs of text, followed by an unnumbered list of ten complaints from corporate travelers (19 lines/214 words); three additional paragraphs from the manager follow. While one complaint focuses on flight attendants disappearing after meal service, the other nine address interpersonal communication issues between customers and flight attendants. They range from a lack of friendliness to voicing complaints about the airline within earshot of customers. Flight attendants are also accused of acting annoyed and hostile during boarding and in-flight. The manager closes with four lines of praise thanking the flight attendants and acknowledging that the majority do "a superb job" (p.2).

Audience

The five thousand flights attendants who received this memorandum had previously agreed to pay cuts, reduced hours, and concessions totaling \$340 million to their strapped US airline in 1993. They no longer receive airline meals while they work on board and must bring their own food. Strained since 9/11, flight attendants' jobs have become more difficult and complex. (Sharkey, 2004). Flight attendants on major carriers are paid \$18-\$21 US per hour; hours are not guaranteed and schedules change constantly. Flight attendants perform boarding duties free; their pay begins when the airplane takes off. One attractive perquisite includes free travel for the attendants and their immediate families. While the job offers the glamour of flying around the world, many feel that the security changes implemented worldwide after 9/11 have taken the charm and romance out of flying.

The manager did not analyze his primary audience to find ways to appeal to the readers and build goodwill. Written in long, convoluted sentences, the memo suffers from verbiage; his four sentences in paragraph one range from 37 to 58 words in length. Experts agree sentences with the most impact and comprehensibility have twenty or fewer words (Guffy, 2003, p.167). Murphy and Hildebrandt suggest the average sentence length for business writers is 16-20 words (1988, p. 60). Goddard (1989) noted comprehension rate drops to 50% if sentences exceeded 28 words. The memo would likely appeal more to the audience with shorter, direct sentences which demonstrate the writer sought first to acknowledge the flight attendants' position before seeking change. Covey stressed seeking first to understand (1989) in his best-selling management book on the habits of effective leaders. As written, the memo lacks fluency and burdens the reader verbosely dense sentences. Since the majority of the message is negative, the reader is likely to become annoyed.

Readability

An analysis of the first two paragraphs using the Gunning Fog Index (1969) reveals problems in this document. The Gunning index measures the readability of a document based on the sentence length and percentage of hard words. It provides a number that corresponds to the educational level necessary to read the document. In other words, a document with a score of eight could be read by an eighth grader; one scoring a 14 could be read by someone with two years of college education. *Reader's Digest* and *Time Magazine* have indexes between 9 and 10; *Scientific American* averages 11 or 12. Hildebrandt (1988) noted documents with scores of 26 or more are typically legal, medical and government documents that are challenging to read (p.64).

Paragraph one was scored at 31 and paragraph two received a 21, averaging 26 for the first two paragraphs. The first paragraph has two sentences averaging 43 words each; fifteen words have three or more syllables. Paragraph two is somewhat better with an average sentence length of 35 words and eighteen words with three or more syllables.

Gunning defined these three syllable plus words as "long words" in his formula as they complicate readability. Density in paragraphs one and two create major obstacles for the reader. The final three paragraphs are considerably better, averaging 13.5, showing that he ended with language more comfortable to his readers, yet still requiring a college education.

As a document addressed to a group of flight attendants, this memorandum fails to take its audience and purpose into consideration. Its complex, wordy style does not effectively engage the reader. The message in the first two paragraphs is lost in verbose discourse. Many flight attendants could have difficulty reading the document and interpreting the message; the memo needs simple, more direct language.

The You-approach

Documents using a you-approach consider the other person's point of view, put readers and their problems first ahead of the writer and focus on the needs of the reader (Bowman and Branshaw; Guffy, 2003). Locker further argues the you-approach involves reader-friendly strategies such as headings and lists which help readers find points (Locker, 2001). While some disagree over including readability and document design with the you-approach (Rodman, 2001), business communication scholars generally agree that the focus is placed on the reader, not the writer, and that culmination of you-attitude strategies and a positive tone contribute to a positive response from the reader (Rodman, 2001). Indeed, Shelby and Reinsch's empirical study of 99 memoranda affirmed the use of positive emphasis and the you-approach (1995) indicating the strategy appears to work with readers.

Experts agree that the-you approach is especially important in bad-news messages. Bovee, Thill and Schatzman point out that writers should "convey concern by looking for the best in your audience" (2003, p. 229). Saying "you' to an audience usually expresses a personal concern and connection with the reader. However, when the audience is at fault, it is best avoid the word "you." Ober suggests using passive and subordinating techniques to avoid finger-pointing and advises writers to "avoid connecting the reader too closely with the negative information" (2003, p. 170). Bovee et al observe that the you-approach is sometimes "best observed by avoiding the word 'you'" (p.229) and Guffy points out that the you-approach is ineffective when "the reader feels singled out for criticism" (p.141). Of the 54 lines in the memo, 39 convey bad news; only the last five lines praise the flight attendants and acknowledge that "the majority....do a superb job (p. 2).

The writer uses the word "you" once in the first paragraph, then does not address readers in second person again until the two closing paragraphs. "You" is used once in paragraph two, but the context is a quotation from a customer complaining that "You are making it very difficult for us to make our people fly AC, because of your poor service." Although the you-approach is used handily in the last two paragraphs, it lacks effectiveness because it follows extensive criticism. The focus on the reader and the compliment come after a myriad of complaints and there is no acknowledgement of the

reader's sometimes awkward position. In sum, the memo is impersonal and does not address the problem in an effective manner. Flight attendants are criticized, but no solution is offered. Since the manager asks for their help, but does not suggest a venue of discussion, the memo is clearly a directive to change behavior. Flight attendants are not addressed as team members nor asked for suggestions; the tone in this memo is parental rather than adult to adult and talks down to the reader.

Three Instructive Points for Managers

First, because leaders must be communicators who can motivate people and solve problems, downward communication in organizations can make or break a manager. This memo provides rich examples of ineffective communication with approaches to purpose, audience and style. Second, problems also occur with length, word choice, and the readability of the document. Third, the tone is ineffective and rhetorical strategies are not directed at the primary audience.. Analyses in these key areas of business communication reveal weaknesses in the memo. Posting the memo on the Internet was certainly one expression of dissatisfaction from flight attendants; however, descriptions of flight attendant behavior found in this memo also suggest that they are dissatisfied with aspects of Air Commander Airlines management. The memo is an attempt to change flight attendants' actions, but it falls short of communicating its message in several strategic areas and alienates readers.

The Rebuttal

The flight attendant who posted the memorandum on Internalmemos.com wrote a 397 word rebuttal criticizing the Air Commander Airlines memorandum (Appendix 2). Entitled "Notes from an outraged flight attendant," the response is divided into two parts. First the flight attendant directly disputes the main points in the memo stating that they "prove that the writer is unaware of what the flight attendant's job entails"(p.2). Five points are enumerated in rebuttal to main points in the memo. Second, the flight attendant presents the manager with three suggestions to improve customer service including stocking the airplane with items passengers have requested, providing layovers that give flight attendants eight hours of rest and furnishing attendants with food on flights. The fourth and most important suggestion, however, is to "encourage rather than anger the flight attendants." The writer continues, "We are not a work group that responds to threats. If you are nice to us, it will result in us treating the customers better" (p. 3). This appears to be a direct comment upon the writer's style and approach to the readers. It reflects on the way the writer presented the problem in the memorandum and suggests the memo has failed to motivate the flight attendants. The language, tone and style have alienated the readers and not encouraged a behavioral change in the flight attendants.

Summary

This memorandum illustrates ineffective downward communication and is excellent example of employee miscommunication. Writers conveying criticism need to Managers play an important leadership role in communicating vital issues in the organization and their communication styles are strategic tools which can be used to affect efficiency and effectiveness in organizations. The ways that they choose to enact problems and bring them into focus profoundly affect how these problems are perceived and processed by members of the organization. When managers fail to communicate effectively, they cause alienation among team members and dissatisfaction in the ranks. Sites like InternalMemos.com will continue to flourish as employees express their frustration and occasional outrage with poor internal communication. Most companies do not want their internal memoranda displayed on the Internet as private information posted publicly quickly deprecates an organization's image and requires considerable damage control. More sensitivity and improved audience analyses will deter employees from reacting negatively to bad-news memos and will motivate improved performance.

Notes

1. The author of the memorandum was contacted by letter and asked several questions regarding the intent of the memo. He did not respond to the inquiry.

Appendix 1

Air Commander Airlines

To All Flight Attendants

Air Commander Airlines©

March 30, 2004

To: All Flight Attendants – BOS/JFK/LGA/EWR/DCA

As our competitive landscape intensifies, and the rapid growth and expansion of our low cost competitors, such as JetBlue, Southwest and Airtran threatens our survival, I thought it would be appropriate for me to share with you some "eye opening" feedback we've received from some of our corporate accounts. This feedback comes directly from customers through various focus group sessions we routinely host in various locations

around the system, and from joint visits we conduct with our Sales Department to our largest revenue producing corporate accounts.

By the way, what is particularly alarming about this feedback, is that the key individuals at these corporations that are responsible for choosing the carrier their company's employees will use, are being pressured by their employees to seek an alternate carrier to do business with instead of Air Commander. These are corporate accounts that are worth millions of dollars in revenue to Air Commander, which we quite frankly cannot afford to lose to a competitor. As the Managing Director of Global Operations for one of our accounts told us, "you are making it very difficult for us to make our people fly AC, because of your poor service."

Customers have told us repeatedly that were it not for our extensive global network, our schedule frequency, and our Commander Air Advantage program program, they would likely choose another airline to serve their needs, because they are dissatisfied with our overall service and lack of consistency.

The following is a sampling of comments and feedback we've received from two of our bigger corporate accounts in the Northwest, one of which, came on board as a corporate account one year ago following a long relationship with General Airlines.

Flight Attendants are not enthusiastic, friendly, or helpful.

"Galley-talk" is distracting, annoying, and makes it difficult to sleep. As a customer, we do not want or need to hear Air Commander's dirty laundry. All companies have internal issues. However, it is inappropriate to discuss internal issues with your customers that have to do with minimum rest, crew meals and salary reductions.

Salary cuts – all businesses have had them. Why do your F/A's think it's appropriate to discuss with customers?

A response to a customer's request is that we are unable to accommodate the customer due to cost cutting by Air Commander.

After the service is accomplished the Flight Attendant disappears.

Making a positive impression when you first board an airplane is really important.

We are afraid of your Flight Attendants and afraid to ask for anything, as they seem annoyed when we do ask for something.

We'd like some personal recognition, such as being greeted by name.

First impressions are very important. As you board the airplane, you want to feel welcomed. Often you feel as though you're imposing on the Flight Attendants.

Flight Attendants should consider each Flight as a client meeting. It is improper to discuss internal problems in a client meeting. We've also had salary reductions, but we don't discuss with our clients.

With the continued development and enhancement of our automation capabilities, our customers rarely need to stop and check-in with an agent anymore, or call reservations to book their flight. Our Flight Attendants are very often the first "face of Air Commander Airlines" that customers come in contact with, whether it's at the gate reader or on board our airplanes.

Our customers have told us there are four elements they value; a clean aircraft, dependability, customer service excellence and consistency. We're aggressively matching prices, increasing advertising and promotions, promoting the strength of our extensive global network and Commander Air Advantage program program, but at the end of the day, it all comes back to delivering the service our customers expect and deserve that makes the difference. Our brand begins and ends with our people, and it is our people, and the service you provide, that will ultimately determine our future.

My purpose in sharing this feedback with you is to solicit your help in changing this perception. Our Flight Attendants are without question the very best in our industry, and I genuinely believe that the majority of our Flight Attendants perform a superb job serving our customers on our airplanes, everyday. Your professionalism and you attention to detail in the safety and service you provide to our customers are unmatched.

Thank you for everything you do, everyday, for our customers, and for each other.

Sincerely, John Doe NE Regional Managing Director

Appendix 2

Notes from an outraged flight attendant:

- 1. These opinions come from 2 corporate travel agents, possibly looking for kickbacks and free vacations.
- 2. There is no corporate policy about "galley talk", we are allowed to talk in the gallies (sic). Besides, most of our passengers wear headphones which they don't even remove when we are speaking to them.
- 3. If a passenger questions me about company/employee policies and relations, I give an honest opinion, but like other flight attendants, I do not talk about it unless asked.

4. I won't lie to my customers when asked why we don't have milk after 10 A.M. on a domestic flight, management made the decision to remove it, despite 2 years of letters requesting it (and other needed items)back from the flight attendants. This letter implies that we should not give our passengers an explanation as to why things are not available. 5. The following statement in the letter proves the writer is unaware of what the flight attendant's job entails,

"Our customers have told us there are four elements they value; a clean aircraft, dependability, customer service excellence and consistency"

- a. Flight Attendants do not clean the aircraft and do not set the policies for cleaning the aircraft.
- b. Dependibility (sic): Flight attendants do not set the schedules, nor do we pilot the aircraft or direct air traffic.
- c. Dependability: Flight Attendants are always dependable, we are there despite the fact that we work without supervision (if I see my supervisor once every six months, it is a miracle)We get to work an hour before our flight and board the aircraft, despite the fact that we are not being paid until takeoff. We also stay late when wheelchairs don't arrive or people are late to pick up their unaccompanied minors.
- d. Customer service excellence and consistency: ie: Passengers want food, a full can of soda (which Air Commander tells us not to give out) and entertainment that does not break down consistently (sic). They want their ticket to cost the same price everytime (sic).

If this manager wants the flight attendants to treat the passengers better, then I suggest that he:

- 1. Provides the necessary equipment, supplies, and support we need to provide good service. I can not give out blankets, soda, food and milk that are not placed on board.
- 2. Encourage rather than anger the flight attendant, we are not a work group that responds well to threats. If you are nice to us, it will tranlate into us treating the customers better.
- 3. Provide layovers in which we get at least 8 hours behind our hotel doors, as 5 hours of sleep has been the normal amount of time we have on layovers lately. Sleep deprivation hurts our additude (sic), not to mention our abilities to look out for problems.
- 4. Provide food for us, if you do not want us bringing our own food on the aircraft when our days are commonly over 10 hours long, without a lunch break.

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