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## MID-IOWA BUSINESS

# Two-way communication essential to organizational success

There's an old Sicilian proverb that states, "Only your real friends will tell you when your face is dirty." Had they already been invented, this proverb no doubt would have been revised to "only your real friends will tell you when your zipper is down."

As a leader within your organization, it's important that you have people who care enough about you and the organization to tell you when your face is dirty.

In my role as a production manager, I was fortunate to have Myron and Bill. Both were supervisors, which meant they reported to the team leaders who reported to me. On many occasions, I found them waiting for me outside my office, typically a day or two after a key announcement or decision.

"OK guys, what did I do this time?" I'd ask.

They would then describe how the recent message had



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been misconstrued by a few workers. On other occasions, they would patiently explain an unintended, yet potential, ramification of the new decision. Their feedback was never judgmental but instead factual and always eye-opening for me.

Then we would discuss damage control. Often, this was as simple as me having one-on-one discussions with a few employees to clarify the message. Other times, it meant tweaking the solution to address the potential harmful consequences.

In short, Bill and Myron saved my bacon on a number of occasions. The emperor could have used both of them on his cabinet prior to modeling his new clothes in public.

In hindsight, there are a number of factors inherent to a culture that allows this type of feedback to occur.

A rigid hierarchical structure that demands that communication only follow "proper protocol" almost certainly squelches valuable feedback. In my experience, there are two reasons people go around their direct supervisors. Either the message doesn't involve them (as was the case described above) or (more likely) they know from experience that the feedback will not be positively received or acted upon by their supervisor.

In the latter case, the bypassed supervisor is typically paranoid because they lack skills and confidence in many areas. They attempt to protect themselves by hoping to filter messages headed to the top.

Healthy feedback organizations make it clear that thinking isn't the sole domain of management. Employees at

every level of the organization are challenged to create the next great idea or simply to identify a small improvement to their part of the process.

Another requirement for a healthy feedback culture is strong teamwork. Implicit trust existed during those conversations in my office. Bill and Myron knew that my goof-ups were honest human mistakes. I knew that their feedback was not politically motivated. It was clear that we were wearing the same color jerseys.

Finally, feedback should almost always be accompanied with an action plan. These aren't esoteric conversations. The ultimate reward to those providing feedback is to act upon it.

Here's a list of questions to assess your role in establishing a healthy feedback culture:

- Are you approachable to all levels of employees within your organization? Do you approach them and get to know them as people first?

- How do you respond when the feedback is less than pleasant? Do you listen to hear the intended message, rationalize or get defensive?

- Do those brave and insightful souls who bother to give you feedback know how much you appreciate them? Do they come back?

- How often do you act upon feedback? Do you close the loop with those providing the feedback so they know what you did with it?

My wish is that every leader is lucky (or skilled) enough to have a number of Bills and Myrons. Nurturing such a culture will save you from a number of dirty faces and much worse.

**Rick Brimeyer** is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development. Further information is available at [www.brimeyerllc.com](http://www.brimeyerllc.com) or by calling (515) 450-8855.