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The Fog of Bureaucracy

by Steven R. Rayner

The “fog of war” was the phrase Napoleon used to describe the point in battle when information channels completely broke down and utter confusion reigned across the field. While engulfed in this cloud of miscommunication decisions were made that needlessly endangered lives and, in the extreme, could lead an army to shooting—and ultimately killing—its own men.

Many organizations today are engulfed in a similar fog of misinformation and confusion—a state I refer to as the *fog of bureaucracy*. It is an outgrowth of steep management hierarchies, narrowly defined work roles and rigid, departmental structures that, by design, limit access to critical information. The average employee finds himself or herself surrounded by this dense, choking cloud of perpetual information darkness.

Given the nature of the bureaucratic fog, it is little wonder that many employees know remarkably little about their organization. Some have difficulty answering even the most basic questions:

- What is the product or service we provide used for?
- Who are our key stakeholders?
- What are the expectations of the people we serve?
- What differentiates our product/services from those provided by other organizations?
- What is our financial performance?
- How does my work relate to the work of others in my work group?
- What is the quality of my work?
- With whom do I share my improvement ideas?
- Why can't I have a say in decisions?

To create a highly cohesive, high performing organization, people must genuinely feel as if they are business partners and not mere cogs in the great organizational wheel. It would be unthinkable for any rational person to willingly enter a partnership if they did not know anything about the product or services the company provided, had no idea what the customers expected, knew nothing about who the key competitors were or about the organization's financial performance. Yet historically, these very same basics are rarely shared with members of the work force. *A self-fulfilling prophecy emerges: employees don't seem to care because they are treated as if there is nothing they should care about.*

Altering the way information flows requires a strong commitment by management since it is, in effect, shifting the very power structure of the organization—those who have greater access to information ultimately have greater influence on determining organizational outcomes. This commitment can be demonstrated by first making *contextual* information easily accessible. This gives employees a broader perspective about the organization, how it is performing and the

strategies that are being pursued to help improve its performance. The second stage of the transfer requires increasing the *operational* information that is available on the shop floor, the customer service counter or in the professional offices. People need to know relevant information regarding such things as quality, productivity, schedule, service, customer feedback, cost and product defects. Once these sources of information are made available, people will naturally begin identifying ways to improve the performance of their group. This requires a *feedback loop* so ideas are thoughtfully considered and, if they have merit, implemented.

The information transfer follows a path from the general to the specific:



Contextual

At the root of a high performing organization are employees who feel and act like partners—who genuinely feel a vested interest in the success or failure of the organization. The seeds for this level of commitment begin by the open and ongoing sharing of information relating to:

Mission

- The mission of the organization
- Guiding values and principles
- Operational guidelines/accepted norms of behavior

Products and/or services

- What products/services the organization provides to its customers
- What differentiates the products/services from others

Customers/clients

- Who customers/clients are
- What customers/clients desire from the product/service

Performance measures

- Performance against key measures
(e.g. output, budget, quality, service level, customer satisfaction, etc.)

Competition

- Who the competition is
- What differentiates their products/services in the market place
- Strategies competitors are likely to pursue

Strategy

- Current strategy and direction

About the Author

Steven R. Rayner is the founder of the consulting and training firm Rayner & Associates, Inc., which specializes in helping organizations implement high performance work systems.

Rayner is the author of *Team Traps: Survival Stories and Lessons from Team Disasters, Near-Misses, Mishaps, and Other Near-Death Experiences* (John Wiley & Sons, 1996). He is also the author of *Recreating the Workplace: the Pathway to High Performance Work Systems* (Oliver-Wight Publications, 1993) and co-author of *Tips For Teams* (McGraw Hill, 1994).

Operational

Once an ongoing means to communicate the context of the business has been established, the next step is to make specific, operational information available. This information is targeted at the job level. The intent is to provide employees with visibility of the performance of their work unit.

At a minimum, operational information must describe:

1. What is happening in the work unit (e.g. quality and output measures, the number of customer complaints, the latest status of a new product, any changes in direction based on new demands from customers);
2. The relationship between the work unit's performance and the overall organizational objectives;
3. What the desires of the work unit's customers are and the degree to which those desires are being met;
4. Direct feedback to team members relating to the performance of the work.

Feedback

The natural evolution of increased information availability is increased problem solving: The more an individual knows about the business and the operation of her work area, the more she is able to contribute in terms of identifying problems and suggesting alternatives for their resolution. It is important that as the amount and relevancy of information increases, it is complemented by a platform where employees can voice their views on the issues and problems the new flow of information has suddenly made visible to them.

Historically, information has been narrowly held, a jewel among those who have it and divvied out strictly on a "need to know" basis. In the future, information must become a commodity, with open access to pertinent information the rule, as people within the organization are seen as having an inherent "right to know" about organization performance. Without such a willingness to share information, managers will doom their employees to operating in the cold, dense fog of bureaucracy.

