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## **ARTICLE** **COMMUNICATION**

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*by Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins*

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Town halls, all hands, skip level meetings, the list goes on. Anyone who works in a corporate environment has experienced them. And the more senior you become, the more you bear the responsibility of using these vehicles to cascade information throughout the organization. But what happens when they fail to work? When they just don't make the impact that you're looking for? One of our executive clients recently reflected with frustration "I don't know what else to do. My calendars are filled with these meetings yet the rumor mill still runs amuck, the communication portion of employee engagement is in the tank, and folks say they don't know what's going on. To be honest, I don't know what they want from me. I feel like I'm experiencing death by all hands!" It made us think, what does one do when the run of the mill communication tactics just don't cut it anymore?

When you're stumped on how to best communicate with people, take a very easy step — just go ask them. That's what our client did. Through some quick and dirty focus groups and interviews at all levels of his organization, he got some clear direction on what would really make a difference. What he found out is simple and straightforward, and might make a difference at your organization, too.

Here's what matters:

**1. What You Say:** While folks appreciate all the meetings, showing up is the half the battle. What you say in these meetings has to have resonance. Have you framed the message right so that it shows what's in it for them? Have you provided a clear sense of what lies ahead organizationally? In our client's case, his message just didn't stick. It presented a glass-half-empty view that made staff more

anxious and stressed about the organization's future rather than giving them a cause and hope to rally around.

**2. How You Say It:** It's all in the delivery. If you think a town hall is your opportunity to get on stage with a big PowerPoint slide and present from behind the podium, you've lost them. No wonder there's a disconnect. No matter how large these meetings, they are a chance to connect with staff on a personal level. And staff yearns for a personal connection with leaders. As our client said in one of his a-ha moments, "We need to do a better job of getting the business information across while not compromising on the human, compassionate side of things." Bingo!

**3. Who Is Saying It:** Quite simply, folks may not want to hear from you alone. That doesn't mean you should disappear, but think about who else needs to be heard. In our client's case, the staff wanted to hear from the rest of the leadership team. Why? Given that it was a newly formed team, they wanted to see if it had a unified, aligned voice.

**4. Where You Communicate:** Here's the zinger. Staff didn't want our client to stop the all hands meetings. In fact, they wanted more of them. Not because they liked the meetings themselves, but because it provided a way for them to see and hear from leaders on consistent basis.

So the real question becomes what can a leader do beyond the meetings to make the organization feel like it's hearing from leadership frequently and consistently? Here are some of the ideas that came up: weekly personal email from the leader, a leader's blog or tweets, the good old fashioned "walk around" of the halls. The take home point is that frequent, small touch points make a huge difference in making others feel engaged with their leadership. And, these things add tremendously to the usual meetings.

There you have it. The all hands need not be a necessary evil, and it certainly isn't the end all. What have you tried to enhance your corporate communications to better engage employees? What out-of-the-box or back-to-basics strategies have you seen work and why?

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