



WHY BOSSES DON'T GET ALL THE NEWS

Not long ago, a friend who works in television complained that the industry has no interest in real business stories. And, I have to agree with him, since we don't see much on television that doesn't involve stock prices or some sort of scandal.

Well, with one exception, perhaps. The British Broadcasting Corporation and PBS in the USA aired a popular business show called "Back to the Floor."

Fast Company magazine first told us about the program, which sees CEOs leaving their corner offices for a stint on the front lines. And, as they work on the front lines, the cameras are rolling.

For many, if not all of the CEOs, the experience is a great eye-opener. And, according to the magazine, "Almost without exception, CEOs learn a lesson in communication. 'We find people at the heart of every organization who know exactly what's right and what's wrong with it,' says Thirkell [Robert Thirkell, the show's producer]. 'But between them and the bosses is a layer of people -- those whose careers depend on sanitizing that information. Bosses are always surprised at how much knowledge exists further down the ladder.' "

With that in mind, let's spend a minute or two thinking about the barriers to good upward communication. And, rather than blame middle management, which seems to be one of the themes of the article, we'll look at the structural issues.

First, upward communication calls for the collecting of information or data. For example, a supervisor might report on the efforts of five front-line staff, a manager then aggregates the data of five supervisors, and a vice-president pulls together all the information provided by five managers.

As the information aggregates this way, it loses most of its context and richness. By context and richness, I mean the anecdotal and personal knowledge that front-line workers gather and build from continuous interactions with customers or users. Obviously, most CEOs don't have time to read reports comprised of hundreds of anecdotes; they want summaries of the information.

Second, as information or data moves upward, it tends to be slotted into pre-existing categories. Employees on the front-lines know and understand the nuances of each customer story; it reflects, to a lesser or greater extent, the personal relationship between worker and customers. But, there's no place for nuance in weekly reports.

Third, upward communication normally deals with compliance, rather than competitive or operational intelligence. Managers use information moving up the hierarchy to determine how well their instructions have been followed. When they want competitive or operational information they use different means, such as bringing in consultants or commissioning studies.

It's always tempting to attribute communication failures to moral failures by managers, but if you really want to understand communication failures, you should start by looking for structural hurdles.

In summary, CEOs who spend time on the front lines will undoubtedly be in for many surprises. But, if they want to stay abreast of the action at the front lines, they'll need to address the structural nature of upward communication.

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