theEMPLOYEEapp®

A PRIMER ON
Frontline Manager Communication

A PRIMER ON
Frontine Manager Communication

Contents

theEMPLOYEEapp®

Why Manager Communication Matters

> "The definition of culture is **how we do things here**. And there's no group of people in your organization who set the stage more for how we do things here than your frontline managers."
>
> — Jill Christensen

Frontline managers are a critical part of an organization. Gallup research shows that they are responsible for 70% of the variance in employee engagement. In manufacturing, their ability to lead and enforce a safety culture can save limbs, even lives. They set the tone for an entire team. People chose to quit and chose to stay based on their manager.

But for years, "the line manager has been seen as a consistent barrier to effective communication throughout an organization" (Line of Sight Report, 2021). In fact, poor line manager communication skills was the second most cited internal comms challenge, and focusing on improving line manager communication has been a top five priority for two years now (State of the Sector, 2021).

Why are managers a top challenge?

Well, for one, many organizations with a high percentage of deskless workers rely on the cascade of communication. This is the process of information trickling down the ladder of your organization hierarchy all the way from the top to the hourly, frontline worker. And there are many problems with solely relying on the cascade rather than investing in channels that can directly reach all employees. But the main issue is that not all managers relay the message the same way. Some deem a message unimportant and don't share it at all. Others misunderstand the why behind the message. The tone can get completely lost in translation. And, before you know it, you have very different reactions, levels of compliance, and attitudes among your frontline teams.

theEMPLOYEEapp®

But this is not entirely the fault of your managers. Our Director of Client Success and Strategy, Amy Jenkins, explains, "often, managers are promoted because they are the best at performing a specific task, but not because they have great people or communication skills."

Harvard Business Review even found that 69% of managers are uncomfortable communicating with their direct reports and 37% are uncomfortable giving direct feedback about their performance. So, clearly there is a skills gap. But the reality is that even if you have a direct line to reach every employee, you will still need managers to:

- Champion change
- Ensure compliance with procedures and policies
- Embody company culture
- Answer questions about communications
- Be a voice for the frontline and share employee feedback

The list goes on. So, in this guide, we're going to cover ways that you can start making a real difference in the way your line managers communicate and lead their teams.

Frontline Manager Comms Challenges

Before we can talk about solutions and strategies, we have to dive into the main challenges impeding good line manager communication.

#1: Insufficient Training. Most companies don't have a robust plan for training line managers on communication and coaching skills. And that's understandable. Finding time and budget to sufficiently train all frontline managers and leaders isn't easy. But this cost is worth it in the long-run. You can start improving training in a more cost and time effective way. Several of our clients do this well with weekly manager tips. These range from how to have stay conversations to how to be better active listeners.

#2: Hard to Control the Message. With the cascade of communication, you have to hope that the message remains intact as it goes down the chain. But this is a lot like the game of telephone, and we know the message isn't exactly the same by the time it reaches the frontline worker—and that's even with people trying their best to adhere to the message and the tone of it.

#3: Your message is not always the priority. When you rely on a manager to share a message with their team, it's possible that it takes the back burner. Your line managers are busy running their shift and may miss important messages.

#4: Overcoming indifference. The sad truth is that sometimes our messages don't seem important. When we don't communicate the why effectively, people tune out or forget or just aren't compelled to take action. And with everything else on the manager's plate, you may find yourself coming up against resistance to changes that need to be communicated.

#5: A lack of access. Companies tend to have more channels to reach their line managers than they do their non-manager frontline workers. But even then, these channels are highly insufficient to overcoming challenges 1 - 4. Some managers have access to email on a shared computer or one in the back of house or off the plant floor. But email has many flaws. For one, messages can easily get buried and an inbox overwhelmed. But email is also not very compelling because it's so difficult to share video messages and enable two-way communication.

Many communication professionals find improving manager comms a daunting challenge to overcome. So, what can you do? Throughout the rest of this guide, we'll share a few tactics that make a real difference in helping your managers cut through the noise to what matters and be better communicators and coaches to their direct reports.

theEMPLOYEEapp®

Areas of Focus

Shift Meetings

Shift meetings are something your managers are probably already doing. But are you making the most of them?

Tip 1: Set a Cadence

Setting a cadence for these shift meetings is key. We recommend making recommendations to your managers to pick something they can stick to rather than forcing them to do daily huddles if that's not sustainable for them or their team. Depending on the industry you're in, a weekly shift meeting might be sufficient.

Setting a regular schedule for a shift meeting is important for a few reasons. This gives your manager some much needed structure regarding when they are supposed to communicate. But it also helps the direct reports of that line manager manage their own expectations. When shift meetings are sporadic, they feel like an afterthought and, therefore, communication and transparency appears to be an afterthought.

Tip 2: Provide Talking Points

If you want a message shared as consistently as possible, it's best to literally write a script of talking points for your managers. This is especially true for complicated changes and updates.

You want to share with them a simple script for what the message is, why it's happening, what is expected of your team, and when it has to occur. And then think through any objections, questions, or concerns that an employee might have. In all likelihood, some of those questions will stump the manager. So take the time to create an exhaustive list of these questions and the answer the manager should give.

This not only saves your managers a ton of time, but it also helps everyone feel more confident in what the change is and how it will affect them.

theEMPLOYEEapp®

Tip 3: Give Managers a Roadmap for Team Meetings

A good shift meeting does four things:

1. It sets expectations among the whole team.
2. It creates transparency.
3. It opens a dialogue.
4. It creates opportunities for recognition.

You need to teach managers how to do all of the above points. It's not enough to say, "have a conversation about x" or "recognize a teammate during every huddle". You have to be prescriptive and assume that these managers don't know how to create constructive dialogue or know how to recognize their direct reports.

So, we recommend using communications to managers—a Manager's Note—to give these examples. This goes above and beyond the talking points for the week. Your managers don't always have time to come up with a creative recognition program, but you can help give them the ideas. They might not know how to start a dialogue, so write some sample questions for them.

And whatever you do, don't just communicate ideas once and then assume they got it. Make this "Manager's Note" a regular part of communication to them. Continuously coach them and give them ideas for how to host better and more effective shift meetings.

theEMPLOYEEapp®

Manager's Note Examples: Talking Points

We'll walk through an example of communicating open enrollment at your company.

Main Message: Hey teams, it's that time of year again! Benefits open enrollment starts October 20th and closes November 20th.

- Materials are being mailed to all team members, will be emailed to all managers, and are available on our Intranet.
- **PRINT & POST** the open enrollment materials in the break room once you receive them.
- **EMAIL** HR@ourcompany.com if you have any questions about enrollment or our benefits packages
- **USE** the attached talking points to answer common employee questions

Talking Points: These are just a few examples. Make this as exhaustive as possible.

Q: I didn't receive my benefits information in the mail. Where do I get the details?
A: Remind them that these are posted in the break room and forward them a copy that we sent you via email. Please also have the employee check their mailing address in our HRIS system to ensure that it is correct.

Q: Did our benefits package change this year?
A: Yes we now have a new provider: Cigna. The basic packages are very similar to what we had with United Healthcare, but now we also offer Pet Insurance.

Q: Why did the benefits change?
A: We changed providers to provide better benefits at a better cost for employees. If you have any concerns about the packages, you can email hr@ourcompany.com.

Q: What happens if I miss the open enrollment deadline?
A: It's important to make sure you enroll in benefits before the November 20th deadline. Please email HR@ourcompany.com in the event that you do miss the deadline. However, we can't guarantee that you'll be able to enroll late. In that case, you would not be able to enroll until next year's open enrollment or if there's a qualifying event. But please note that if you already enrolled last year or in previous years, if you make no changes including declining coverage, your selections will remain the same and you will still have coverage.

Manager's Note Examples: Recognition

Recognition is a powerful engagement tool...when it's done right. Often, it feels forced like a box being checked off. And managers who are already uncomfortable addressing their whole team might really struggle with this.

Here are some fun, impactful recognition ideas your managers can use:

- **Run a contest for a week/month and tie it to a business objective.** In retail/restaurants, maybe this is sales. In hospitals, maybe it's tied to CAHPS scores. In manufacturing and logistics, maybe it's a safety score. Whatever it is, pick a metric and have your employees, teams, or even locations compete. Celebrate the winners and recognize how hard everyone worked.

- **Every month, recognize a member of your team based on living one of the company values.** If one member of your team has a really great attitude even though things have been hard, thank them for that in front of everyone for living your value of "Positivity". If you have a new hire that has "Taken Ownership" and got up and running fast, recognize them and the people who trained them. Tying recognition to a value like this also reinforces the desired culture.

- **Celebrate work anniversaries and birthdays.** This is a great way for a manager to show they care without requiring a massive lift on their part. Remind managers that not all recognition is just about performance. It can be just as important to celebrate individual milestones and acknowledging someone's work anniversary can have a profound impact.

- **Peer recognition.** Managers can't possibly see everything. And that's okay! Some of the most impactful recognition comes from peers. Every quarter or few months, your managers can use their shift meeting to have everyone write down the name of a colleague they appreciate and why. Then put them in a bowl and read them out anonymously.

Areas of Focus

Employee Performance Reviews

Giving performance reviews is a place where frontline managers can struggle. Based on HBR research, 37% of line managers are uncomfortable giving feedback. And more still are uncomfortable having difficult conversations. And of course they feel this way. If a manager hasn't been trained on giving constructive feedback and conflict resolution, these conversations can be incredibly stressful. So we recommend:

- **Looking at existing manager training.** Is there a section on performance evaluations? If not, you can work with HR and/or your training team to create this curriculum. And if there is already training on this, can you conduct a focus group with line managers to learn where their training was lacking?

- **Conducting a survey.** It's always helpful to ask your line managers what they struggle with and where they could use more support. This will help you prioritize changes to onboarding materials and net-new training.

- **Creating a digital manager training resource.** Repetition is key to learning a new skill. So, even if you have a good manager training program, your managers might need more regular training and resources. Around performance review season, you could release a series of videos on giving feedback, having tough conversations, receiving feedback, etc.

Areas of Focus

Using the Cascade the Right Way

Another way to improve manager communication efficiency is to change how you rely on the cascade of communication. Although this isn't the best method for daily messages to make their way to frontline worker, it does serve a purpose. And when used right, can be a powerful change management tool.

The great thing about the cascade of communication is that you inform people in the right order. Your field/regional leaders are in the know first and then your line managers and then your employees. And this order is important because it's those leaders who are going to be expected to answer questions and potentially explain further.

But unfortunately, you often see these scenarios playing out:

Scenario A. You don't have any channels to directly reach frontline workers so you cascade the message down from the top and that message changes as it trickles down.

Scenario B. You do have direct channels for all employee groups, but you don't phase out or particularly target the messages, so your managers are finding out at the same time as everyone else.

Neither of these scenarios create an ideal employee experience for anyone. And this can be a major change management bottleneck. What you really want is:

Scenario C. Using your direct channels for each employee group, you inform each group from the top down in order with messages targeted to each. That means having more detail and talking points for senior leaders and line managers, and then directly communicating the message to the frontline with your manager prepared to discuss it in detail and open up the dialogue.

Scenario C is harder to achieve because it requires planning and enough time to plan the strategic timing of each message to your different employee groups. But this is the best way to support your managers and set them up for success in the field. So, pushback on your stakeholders and set a regular content meeting with them to get ahead and stop last-minute comms requests.

theEMPLOYEEapp®

Areas of Focus

Timeliness of Communication

We asked frontline workers and managers what they think could be improved with communication from their company, and one of the top write-in responses was that the communication be more timely (State of Frontline Worker Communication, 2021).

It's no surprise that *when* a message is communicated makes a big difference. And this starts with us in corporate getting the messages out. Whatever roadblocks your facing—approvals, striving for perfection, etc.—try to work through as many of them as you can. Because we need to be better about not communicating things last-minute or not providing adequate follow-up.

But this can also be an issue on the frontline when you don't have direct channels for communication. What if your managers forget to share a message about a promo until the day of...even though you communicated it weeks ago? What if they never share messages they're supposed to? What if they never appear available to respond to questions? Their ability to show up and deliver messages on time is critical. And you can work on this using some of the tactics we've already covered:

- Providing talking points and shift notes for team huddles.
- Creating training materials that review why things like timeliness in communication is critical.
- Giving your frontline managers feedback on communication (train the trainer first!).
- Including questions about communication in regular surveys. Give teams a voice and figure out who might need extra support. Remember this isn't a witch hunt, but an effort to find out how to better support managers.

Case Studies

There are many ways to start improving manager communication at your organization—from giving them comms tools to focusing on training. Get inspiration from two of theEMPLOYEEapp's clients.

ELLWOOD: Manager Training

ELLWOOD is a highly dispersed manufacturing company with ten divisions each with their own leadership and, often, microculture. They adopted theEMPLOYEEapp to start improving their top-down communication to their teams and to reinforce the larger purpose of the company.

They have already used the app to improve leadership communication from executives by being able to share regular briefs and video messages from the CEO and president of each division.

But the ELLWOOD team also sees the opportunity to share education and career progression information more easily with their teams, and they have started a campaign of manager training tips on the app.

These trainings include things like:

- How to request and receive team member feedback
- How to delegate and why it matters
- How to coach employees
- How to be a good listener
- Quick leadership tips

Read Full Case Study
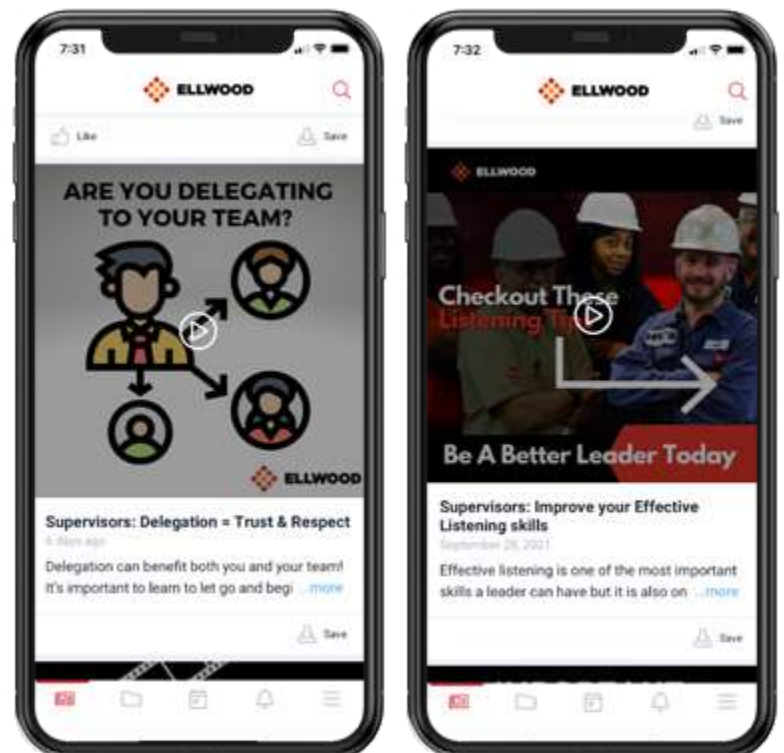
theEMPLOYEEapp®

NFI

The majority of NFI's staff do not sit behind a desk for work. With over 300 facilities across North America and 11,000 employees, this made communication difficult.

Since adopting their mobile employee app, NFI has been able to drive more engagement and connect their employees to the company's purpose and values. And one of the main ways they have done this is by localizing communication.

Because they are a logistics company, many employees don't even all work in a facility. Some are dock workers. Some are out driving the trucks and transport vehicles. And that made it really important for NFI to give their managers and leaders in the field a way to communicate directly with their teams.

NFI now has 450 local leaders and managers who have permission to post in their EMPLOYEEapp. These managers can now share timely, relevant, and meaningful information with their teams at the local level, while allowing the corporate team to be able to see and report on all that communication.

Read Full Case Study

About theEMPLOYEEapp

theEMPLOYEEapp was created by communications and HR professionals to address the challenges organizations face communicating with a dispersed and deskless workforce. theEMPLOYEEapp is an internal communication and engagement solution that allows workers to have fast and easy access to the information, documents, and resources they need to succeed in their work.

Our app allows you to target information to your employees when and where they need it on their smartphone, tablet, or computer, and empower leaders and frontline managers to engage and activate employees across the organization. Unlike most traditional communications channels, theEMPLOYEEapp creates a customized, branded experience for employees, encouraging your workforce to join together in a single, centralized channel.

Our Mission is to enable the effortless flow of meaningful information for organizations driven by frontline workers.

Request a Demo

theEMPLOYEEapp®