

Corporate Culture and Communication Styles

Written by Sam Swaminathan
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It has never ceased to amaze me how differently different people communicate. I know, I know - there's nothing new about that. After all, each of us is different, and so each of us is bound to communicate differently. Yes? True, but have you ever wondered whether there exists a strange connection between the culture of a corporation and the communication style of its people? I don't know about you, but the curious sort that I am, I have been wondering about it for a while. Since wondering about wasn't isn't enough, I started observing this phenomenon across companies for some time. The observations seem to reveal that there is a definite connection after all, between corporate culture and communication styles. So what did I discover? Read on.

Let's take the rarest breed of companies first. These I classify as **Friendly Companies**. As I said, these are rare indeed, and therefore are an endangered species. You walk in to this type of firm, and you find the receptionist greeting you with a genuinely wide smile. She makes you feel comfortable, looks you in the eye and greets you. You state the purpose of your visit, and you are attended to quickly and courteously.

If you have to wait for a little while, you will be sure to be offered tea or coffee, or something like that. You have the freedom to choose whether you want it black, with sugar or without, and so on. You are most likely to find recent issues of good magazines, either the public or the in-house variety. You could even strike a worthwhile conversation with the receptionist, and learn something about the organization. Now, don't get me wrong - I don't mean getting to know the company's deepest secrets, but information that is more general in nature, and not classified. You feel nice, and soon you meet whoever you were supposed to meet.

Supposing you were to call up a **Friendly Company**, instead of visiting someone there. Your call is promptly and courteously answered, and you are even connected to the right person, if

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he or she is around. Oh, I almost forgot, you would rarely engaged tones for long periods when calling up these sorts. So your chances of getting through are very high. Next on, the person you wish to speak to comes on the line, and engages you in a pleasant and focused conversation. The person sounds really friendly and really professional. You finish your conversation, as before, feeling nice, and good.

But this isn't always the case. Just as there is always a chance of a blemish on a beautiful face, such companies also suffer from a couple of strange characters right out a Dracula movie. And these people are not stupid. They are extremely smart. One company that scores very high marks in my communication rating scale is an interesting case in point. The MD is a great guy, and we enjoy each other's company whenever we meet. His secretary goes out of the way to be nice to me, while he is around. So in the early days of my association with the MD, I would call up the secretary whenever I wished to speak to him. Boy, is she different when only the two of us are talking. The stiff upper lip suddenly sprouts, and I get replies made up of monosyllables. I thought about it for a while, and concluded that something about me must be upsetting her. So what did I do? Well, I simply asked her whether I offended her in any way. "Of course, not, Sam", was her crisp reply. The only problem was that the tone of her reply meant, "Of course, you idiot"!

Having failed to make much sense of this vexing matter, I decided that more was required to be done. I made some discreet inquiries of other executives in the company, and discovered that she was pretty sarcastic and rude with most people. It appears that her behavior largely depends upon the position of the person she is speaking to. Hey, I told myself, I am a CEO. So, nothing can be more exalted than that (Ugh!). But wait, I forgot that CEOs of companies with turnovers of less than \$10 million or thereabouts don't count in her calculations. Would you believe it, this twit of a person packages her behavior on the basis of your position and relative company size. Have I benefited at all from my interactions with this lady? You bet I have. Thanks to her, I have no problem describing downright nauseating behavior to seminar participants. Gad.

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Then there is the **Freezer Company**. Here everything and everybody is a lump of meat, waiting to be disposed off most efficiently (and most ineffectively). Their phone lines carry sub-zero temperature responses to your inquiries. You are left in doubt whether you are talking to polar bears or people. Sure, your request will be attended to in a most orderly fashion. But you can derive neither pleasure nor satisfaction from the exchange. The staff of this company are people with all head and no heart. You return with a feeling of having been scrubbed with an antiseptic. Have you ever thought how it would be to be clinically clean? You would feel clinically clean, that's it; nothing more, nothing less. Insurance companies are particularly good examples of this style.

There is an even worse sort, where not only is the service appalling, the staff are appalling as well. I call this type the **Outrageous Organization**. Mark my words, there are several of them out here. These guys come with a *holier than thou* attitude, and their service will reduce you to tears. The only time they show any warmth is when they woo you for business at the initial stage of contact. Once they have garnered your custom, they just don't care. The contact person is always traveling, so you can never meet the guy. A frightfully rude assistant will answer your calls, and tell you that the person you wish to talk to is awfully busy, and can only meet with you next month. Financial service companies excel in this style.

Why, oh why, I ask myself, do companies communicate in such a manner? Because of the arrogance of past successes, and impudence born out of mistaken notions of invincibility. Why don't you do a reality check on your company communication style, and figure out where you stand?