Why Communication Isn't the Same as Sharing Understanding

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Most organizations believe they have a communication problem.

Often, they have an understanding problem.

The email was sent.

The presentation was delivered.

The town hall happened.

The project updates were shared.

Communication occurred.

Yet somehow:

- People are still confused.
- Priorities aren't aligned.
- Resistance emerges.
- Different teams interpret the same message differently.

If communication happened, why didn't understanding follow?
Because communication and understanding are not the same thing.

The Information Trap

Many leaders measure communication by activity:

- How many emails were sent?
- How many meetings were held?
- How many presentations were delivered?

The focus is on transmission.

But understanding isn't measured by what was sent.

It's measured by what was received, interpreted, and acted upon.

People can hear the same message and walk away with completely different conclusions.

Communication asks: Did we tell them?

Understanding asks: Do they know what it means, why it matters, and what happens next?

Those are very different questions.

Why This Matters During Change

I've spent more than thirty years helping organizations navigate change.
One of the most common statements I hear from leaders is:
"We've communicated this several times."
Most of the time, they're right.
The communication happened.
What didn't happen was shared understanding.

Employees were told:

- What was changing.
- When it was changing.
- How it was changing.

But they still wondered:

- What does this mean for me?
- Why are we doing this?
- What problem are we trying to solve?
- How will success be measured?

Until those questions are answered, understanding remains incomplete.

Understanding Requires Context

Information tells people what happened.

Context helps people understand why it matters.

Without context:

- Facts become noise.
- Messages become announcements.
- Communication becomes a checklist item.

Context transforms information into meaning.
That's where trust begins.
That's where alignment happens.

And that's where change becomes sustainable.

Cookie Culture, Visibility, and Understanding

This same challenge appears in workplace visibility.

People often assume that if the work was completed, others will naturally understand its value.

But that's rarely how organizations work.
A project finishes.
A problem is solved.
A risk is avoided.
A customer issue disappears.
Others see the outcome.

What they don't always see is:

- what happened,
- why it mattered,
- or the value that was created.

The contribution remains invisible because understanding never occurred.

In many ways, the Visibility Gap™ is an understanding gap.

People can't recognize value they don't understand.
A Better Goal

The goal of communication shouldn't be simply to share information.
The goal should be to create shared understanding.

Because understanding creates:

- alignment

- trust
- engagement
- visibility
- recognition
- lasting change

Communication starts the conversation.
Understanding makes the conversation matter.

Closing Thought

The next time you're preparing a message, consider asking a different question.

Instead of:
"How should I communicate this?"

Ask:
"What would people need to understand in order to act on this successfully?"

That shift can make the difference between a message being heard and a message being understood.

Communication transfers information. Understanding transfers meaning

Continue the Conversation

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