



## An Open Door Swings Both Ways

By John Towler

**The Situation:** Before he became a manager, George was bothered by the lack of information about what was happening in the departments in which he had worked. He resolved never to allow that to happen under his leadership, and made it a policy to brief his staff regularly. These meetings had been going very well in his estimation. George was a polished speaker and he felt he presented an interesting and clear talk; there were seldom any questions. He also let people know that he had an open door policy and kept them informed through frequent memos.

Imagine George's surprise when he was called into his vice-president's office, to be told that a delegation of disgruntled employees had told her that there were serious problems that weren't being addressed. They said George was both unwilling to hear or to act on their concerns. George was flabbergasted. He had had no inkling that there were any problems, and pointed out that he had an open door policy and held monthly briefing sessions. He suggested the complaints came from one or two troublemakers; there couldn't be any substance to the complaints or he would have heard about the issues long before now. The fact no one raised these concerns at monthly meetings or spoke to him privately only reinforced his contention.

The V-P didn't agree. The employees had convinced her that there were problems that they were serious and that George had either dismissed or ignored them. She demanded an explanation for why George wasn't aware or in control of the situation.

**The Analysis:** The basic problem here was poor communications. George thought he was opening up lines of communication to his staff, but failed to see that he was the only one communicating. Rather than setting up a communications process, all he had established was a one-way flow. He told staff whatever he wanted, but he was hearing nothing back. George had made it clear that he was the expert that his opinion was the only one that counted. George had effectively killed a two-way flow. The danger signals were there, but George wasn't listening.

George's idea of good communication was to tell people what to do and then reinforce it through written memos. This only strengthened the employees' attitude that there wasn't much point in talking to George.

**The Solution:** There were two problems here. George had to learn to be a listener, to make it safe for people to tell him things and to foster true two-way communications. The second issue was how to address the fact that his people had gone over his head because they had lost confidence in him.

A third party helped resolve the situation by pointing out the weaknesses in George's well-intentioned approach. The idea of a monthly meeting was good, but only George

knew what was to be discussed. Employees seldom say what they feel for fear of reprimand or retaliation. A safe atmosphere is a matter of trust and this is something to be earned over time.

The solution was to restructure sessions so everyone had a chance to raise issues for discussion. An agenda was posted beforehand, and George made sure to solicit comments from everyone. He learned not to let the sessions slip into "bitch" sessions, or personalities to be attacked. He set ground rules encouraging people to focus on positive things first. The sessions became pleasant meetings where successes were publicly acknowledged and rewarded, which helped to build team spirit.

As well, George stopped taking the burden on his shoulders. When someone raised a problem, George asked how it might be solved. He asked for suggestions and delegated action to those most concerned. The attitude became one of 'If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.'

George cut back on his memos, too, figuring they only serve to make the sender look important. He had to start to deal in person with his staff and to follow up with memos only when really necessary. As a result, he spent more time talking to and listening to his people.

To solve the immediate crisis, George called a special meeting where he accepted full responsibility for what had happened, but also explained his motivation. And he stressed that employee opinions really were important. He explained how he intended to change things. Finally, he challenged people to suggest solutions instead of merely pointing out difficulties. Naturally, people were skeptical of George's ability to change, but he suggested that they all had to adopt a new attitude.

Over time, things did improve. The department operated more as a team, more so as George learned to develop his staff instead of merely directing them.

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