

INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIA BEDELL, COMMUNICATIONS LEADER IT&S AND FINANCE, BP, AND JAMES BROOKE, DIRECTOR, THRESHOLD COMMUNICATIONS

Case study: BP

BP is one of the world's largest energy companies, providing its customers with fuel for transportation, energy for heat and light, retail services and petrochemicals products for everyday items. BP's IT&S function provides IT and telecommunications services across the entire BP organization. It employs around 3,500 staff and contractors across over 90 countries worldwide.

COACHING LEADERS TO FACILITATE TEAM CONVERSATIONS

Training plays an important role in how BP's IT&S function equips managers to hold productive conversation with their teams. The content that forms part of the "Leaders as communicators" course covers simple but effective techniques to improve dialogue, from dealing with hostile comments or questions, to simply learning how to listen.

In 2006, a training course was introduced within BP's IT&S function to coach line managers to communicate more effectively¹. Enabling them to engage their teams in conversation is a strong focus of the course.

James Brooke, director of Threshold Communications, has been working with BP since 2006 to develop and deliver the course, which employs psychologists, professional performers and techniques adapted from psychology theory. It helps managers develop self-awareness and find ways to replace unhelpful habits with more productive ones.

"People often come along to these types of events (not just in BP) thinking they want to become a great speaker with high impact," Brooke says. "But a lot of it is actually about being a better listener. Although that's not always high on their agenda when they attend these events, they soon realize it's the power of listening that makes a leader more engaging."

Victoria Bedell, communications leader IT&S and Finance, BP, says the course, "Isn't purely about dialogue. The two-day event covers several skills and techniques, from effective listening to storytelling. It helps people have confidence and presence when communicating. It includes how to take a large presentation pack, distill it as a story for the team and encourage them to discuss it and ask questions."

Why was the course started?

As sources of information, immediate line managers are the chief influencers and opinion leaders in a business. Evidence from Threshold's 2009 YouGov research (page 49) shows that messages from immediate line managers are most likely to affect employee engagement.

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

Brooke says 2006, when the course was first developed, was an interesting time for BP. "The company went from being loved and adored to having a tough time in the press. We know the motivation and discretionary effort people commit is affected by how they feel about the organization – and leaders must be able to tell their organization's story effectively.

"People trust the face they know and you can only do so much with very senior leaders carrying the messages. Ultimately, people want to hear what's happening from their manager. The factors correlating most strongly with people's commitment and motivation are whether their line manager talks through company plans with them and encourages their input.

"The strongest correlation is whether a line manager genuinely listens. If line managers are to become more effective communicators, they must understand it's not just about 'transmit', but also about 'receive'. Through the course, we've enabled them to become more effective listeners."

Course development followed a period of analysis where internal communication asked staff to assess the communication they received in a typical two-week period – a plethora of PowerPoint, preference for email over face to face or even telephone, plus masses of acronyms and jargon. Perhaps most importantly, they felt very little thought had gone into developing messages that worked for the receiver as well as the sender.

What does dialogue mean to you?

Brooke describes dialogue as "the essence of effective communication – a continuous communication loop." He goes on to say, "When people listen to us, we're more likely to give them credibility for the messages we hear. The simple act of listening fulfills a basic need in people. It also provides that all-important feedback." Brooke believes the communication industry still thinks of communication as "transmitting". He says upward communication is arguably at least as important as downwards – if not more so at certain times.

Key points

- BP's "Leaders in communication" course was introduced in 2006 in the IT&S division of the business. It remains popular with positive feedback from managers and a waiting list of 50-80 people.
- The course teaches techniques that help managers lead more engaging conversations with their teams, such as persuasion and influence, dealing with hostile comments or questions and listening to feedback.
- The course feedback shows that managers feel more confident about their communication skills after attending the course.
- The course forms part of a broader approach to supporting leadership communication, which collectively has a positive impact on perception of internal communication and engagement levels.
- Although the internal communication department initiated the course, HR is consulted with to make sure it doesn't duplicate existing training and development.

Case study continued overleaf

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

Threshold's leading acting coach, Peter Nicholas, helps business leaders become more effective communicators. He says, "Humans are by nature collaborative animals. We have the greatest concentration of muscle groups in our faces, because surveying the human face plays an important part in the nature of trust at a primal level."

How does dialogue feature in this initiative?

"We keep emphasizing listening and use elements of Threshold's YouGov research to provide references throughout the course," Bedell says. "Although we use the listening theme in some exercises, the course also includes storytelling – how to create a hook to get an audience listening to you more effectively."

She says participants want to communicate and lead their team more effectively. Although listening is critical, they also need to know how to communicate various business messages in a compelling way.

"They can practice new techniques in a safe environment and get feedback," she continues. "We use actors in different scenarios where participants can 'stop', 'pause' and 'rewind' the action. Participants use these opportunities to give feedback to a 'manager' – the actor – who seems similar to them. This way, they can see immediately the effects of doing things differently."

The course now differs slightly because the exercise material comes from within BP. "For example, we use our CIO's presentation pack from a town-hall meeting. Being presented with a 12-slide pack from your CIO, to share with your team, can be quite daunting. Our leaders use real business material by breaking it down

Threshold's 2009 YouGov research

- Employees are considerably more likely to trust their direct line manager, than they are to trust more senior leaders in their organization.
- Only 32 percent of employees feel that the way their line manager works with them supports their motivation.
- Where line managers talk through company plans and aims, employees are significantly more likely to feel motivated and committed.
- Where line managers genuinely listen and seek input and ideas, employees are significantly more likely to feel motivated and committed.
- The extent to which employees are confident that their organization has a clear plan to withstand the current economic climate, correlates directly with their motivation and commitment.

YouGov conducted the research on behalf of Threshold during January and March 2009 with a sample of 1,913 full-time employees.

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

to discover how to share the information more effectively – what the team needs to know, how to make it relevant and how to shape it.”

Is this course for all managers?

“The course is designed for all leaders,” Bedell responds. “Last year our CIO’s direct leadership team nominated the senior managers they wanted to attend and we recently ran a session for a complete team. This particular senior leader had found the event valuable and wanted his senior team to experience it.”

“Because it’s a whole team, we can review the impact on direct reports as a ‘control group,’” Brooke adds. “We can check performance over three to six months, but anecdotally we already think it’s providing a performance boost.”

As a result of the course, participants have a common language and use common metaphors. This common language is also getting into the business as people are starting to use phrases from the course. “There’s a view that people have influenced others not yet attending – that’s the way you start to change the culture,” Brooke says.

What areas does the course cover?

The two-day course covers a number of different areas including:

- How simplified communication leads to simplified organizations.
- Why we believe in certain leaders (and fail to believe in many others).
- Persuasion and influence (with your integrity intact).
- Understanding blockages to relationships (and what to do about them).
- Dealing with hostile comments or questions.
- The Pygmalion effect (why confident communicators create higher-performing teams).
- How communication drives or blocks performance.
- The journey from blame to accountability.

How have you measured progress?

Bedell says the course is very successful. Each one takes 20 participants and although the courses are not heavily promoted, the waiting list is always about 50-80 people. “Feedback is good and participants say the course is stimulating, challenging and they would recommend it.”

Her team conducts follow-up calls with participants, focusing on qualitative feedback and how people have used the learning. “This year’s big push is talking to managers and their teams to discover what changes in behavior they’ve observed as a result of people attending the course.” One person says, “Having come on this course, I realize I’m quite ineffective in negotiation because I come across aggressively. I’ve changed my style and now spend more time listening. The reaction I get is more positive.”

Case study continued overleaf

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

Another says, "I was going to a meeting with the usual PowerPoint deck. But I put it to one side and did things differently." Brooke tells them that if they start a presentation with a bulleted list of objectives, people's eyes are likely to glaze over. They must get attention from the outset.

One leader started a meeting with a newspaper headline, "This is what's going to happen if we don't take some action." Another began by saying, "No one leaves this room until we agree on these issues."

On the subject of listening, one participant says, "I learned to shut up when I'd normally talk and it was amazing what I found out from people!"

Are there other ways to measure success?

BP conducts a regular employee engagement pulse survey. "Our function's results increased last year especially around internal communication – it's timely, relevant and easy to understand,"

Bedell says, "Our engagement score has increased too. You can link some of that back to this course, but the course is only part of our overall communication strategy. It's not the only thing we've been doing and wouldn't work if it was on its own."

Have you relied on the courses as a "stand alone" – or have you changed your communication processes and systems to create the behavioral changes you were originally looking for?

"The course wouldn't work if it was a stand-alone approach," Bedell replies. "It's one strand of the communication strategy. It raises awareness of the need for managers to be more effective communicators and gives them the support and skills to do that."

"Our other communication activity ensures managers have the information they need – and it's accessible, so they can use the skills from 'Leaders as Communicators' to engage their teams. It forms part of a wider, comprehensive communication strategy supporting the IT function."

"The communication strategy is based on the listening we do with the organization through regular qualitative feedback, check-ins with our communication network and more formal feedback through employee and town-hall surveys."

Communication activities and content are largely driven by what IT&S people say they need and how they like to receive it, all of which make it easier for managers to engage their teams. Bedell provides planned leadership communication activities including town-hall meetings and smaller listening sessions. The mix of internal communication activities also includes social-networking tools and an all-staff newsletter.

"The feedback we've gathered from these other activities is a reflection of the core course concepts – that we have a story and compelling messages." These activities help people understand the function's priorities, how they support BP's wider agenda and their role in making it happen.

Case study continued overleaf

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

Bedell says that having leaders take the time to communicate and role model the behaviors exemplified in 'Leaders as Communicators' has been a big success factor. "The face-to-face activities are supported by our core communication channels, for example a monthly round-up of progress and news. We continue to work at making our messages consistent, simpler and easier to understand, and always make the link between the company, the function and the team/individual."

How has the course developed?

"What's exciting is how this course has matured and is explicitly linked to real business communication – it's not theoretical or abstract," Brooke says. "Messages from the CIO form some course content and sessions use actors to create a typical business communication cascade."

He describes a typical cascade presentation. "People press their 'forward button' and plough through the slides. We encourage attendees to deconstruct what normally happens to understand what works and what doesn't. They're asked to think how it comes across for recipients, and then work with the 'manager' – an actor – to help their communication style become more effective."

Course leaders ask participants, "What's your compelling story? Is it credible? Are you using plain language to build trust and credibility, or jargon? How are you blending what you say with how you're listening?"

How do people now deal with communication from elsewhere in BP?

"We enable leaders to take responsibility for being an effective communicator through this course," Bedell explains. "We say, 'You'll receive content from elsewhere, but it's what you do with it that's important. You have a critical role to play, so here are skills and techniques you can adapt and use.'"

"We help them think about the receiver," Brooke adds. "We demonstrate ways to be more effective and coherent by cutting out waffle and minimizing the receiver's 'time cost'. We help leaders learn how a story works and to see the story in business presentations."

He asked participants on the last course to find an email on their laptop and improve on it. If they felt brave, he suggested, picking their own. One of the skeptics sent two emails to his team saying, "Here's the one I was going to send – and this is what I'll send after this course. Which do you prefer?" His team thought the second one was great.

What have you learned from course participants about how the communication team could do things differently to support them?

"To simplify messages, not use jargon and make them relevant," Bedell replies. She knows how important it is to link BP, IT&S and team priorities so it's easy for people to see the part they play in the organization's success.

Case study continued overleaf

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

She also ensures materials distributed to leaders and line managers for sharing with their teams are clear, easily accessible and jargon-free. These materials provide prompts enabling them to quickly and easily engage their teams.

Consistency of message is also critical. "Not to keep changing the way we describe our business priorities or to use complex frameworks to describe them – to keep things simple," she adds.

"You can't always rely on a cascade to work. You must have clear objectives with associated measures. We test that communication is reaching the targeted audiences, that they understand it and if not ask them how we can improve."

What is your advice for implementing a similar approach?

1. *Senior leader buy-in.* Bedell says this is imperative. "We ensure our program continues to be important to our senior team by sharing participant feedback. Ultimately they fund it and we want them to encourage their people to attend."
2. *Clear objectives.* "Be clear about what you're trying to achieve," Bedell advises. "The course must fit your vision and stay true to your objectives. We've listened to feedback and tweaked the course, but its core is still the same."
3. *Feedback.* Bedell's team gathers participant feedback against the original objectives and follows up with phone calls. "After the next two courses, we'll be reviewing how it's delivering wider value to the business."
4. *Refresh and remind.* "Get your communication people on the training program," she urges. "It helps them remember how communication should be working. It's a refresher and reminder of what we should all be doing."

How do you link with HR?

Bedell is keen to work with HR and ensure she is not overlapping or duplicating. "We developed and funded the course because of a gap in provision. We continue to liaise with HR to make sure this is still the case, although BP does have other communication courses, on presentation skills for example."

"The biggest challenge for organizations is that you can't have effective strategy unless you address communication through the line," Brooke says. "But communication through the line won't improve unless you help people change their behavior – and show them how."

He says a further consideration is whether to position this type of initiative away from "training". Bedell's response is to refer to it as a "communication masterclass".

Brooke adds, "It's an extension of the communication strategy and demonstrates what good communication looks like."

Case study continued overleaf

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: BP

Bedell adds a word of caution. "It's not about a performance management conversation. We've not allowed scope creep into the performance area. Our initiative is about organization messages and how good communication works – although we recognize these skills can be used in many different situations."

What are the implications of the YouGov research?

Threshold's 2009 report states, "Independent research indicates that in face-to-face situations people are more likely to demonstrate higher degrees of fairness and compassion, than where face-to-face contact is removed from the process. This suggests there's little benefit in posting plans on the company intranet. Too many people in too many organizations forget that the conversation is the most fundamental technology of communication."

It points to an interesting paradox. More employees say they don't feel their line manager supports their motivation, than those who do. But, at the same time, employees tend to trust their line manager more than their senior leaders. Why this contradiction? Threshold believes organizations fail to develop line managers as leaders.

"It's worth remembering political strategists or people marketing consumer goods would give their eye-teeth to have access to such a clearly definable network of influencers and opinion leaders as an immediate line manager," Brooke observes. He believes organizations who commit to developing their line managers as effective communication hubs are more likely to sustain a committed and motivated workforce and be in better shape during a recession – and through to recovery.

1. A case study on the introduction of the course, "Coaching BP's IT managers to engage their teams" was published in SCM August/September 2007.