



The Eight-Word Message

Your security will come first and foremost from being an attractive prospect to employers, and that attractiveness involves having the abilities and attitudes that an employer needs at the moment.

William Bridges, *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs*

You can use an Eight-Word Message to make sure those more senior than you know what you want them to know about you. It will help you keep your career on track and improve your chances of getting ahead. Here are a few examples.

CASE STUDY *Judy* Not Getting Credit

Judy, Jim, and Helen had worked 70 hours a week for the last three weeks to complete the Airbag Project. Judy was proud and relieved when it was done on time. Then she found out that Jim and Helen were getting all the credit. In fact, it seemed that no one even knew she had worked on the project. There had been a pattern for her of not getting recognition for her work. Once more, she was being overlooked. She thought about looking for a new job and working for a company that would be more fair—someplace that would appreciate her hard work. Or she could go to her boss and complain about not getting credit. Instead, she decided to start using a message of

about eight words whenever she wanted people to know something about her—especially those higher up. And right now she had a strong message to get across. The message was: “I worked on the Airbag Project.”

Most people miss everyday opportunities to get out information about themselves. For example, when Mr. Coyle, her boss’s boss, is in the same elevator with Judy, he always greets her with his predictable “Good morning, Judy. How are you?” Judy, just as predictably, politely responds, “Fine, and how are you, Mr. Coyle?”

This time, however, Judy decided to say, “Great—now that we’ve completed the Airbag Project.” He almost had to ask, “Oh, were you involved with that?” This gave her the opening she wanted. “Yes. Three of us worked 70 hours a week for the last three weeks. I was in charge of all the marketing literature. I think it’s an award-winning package.”

As she came into contact with other people whom she wanted to know about her work, Judy gave them the same message. Gradually people were showing their appreciation. Her self-esteem went way up. If she continues to do good work and makes sure the right people know about it, Judy’s career will have a more promising future.

There is proper dignity and proportion to be observed in the performance of every act of life.

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Selecting the Targets for Your Message

It's not enough to do a good job. People—especially those more senior than you—have to know that you've done a good job. Managing the message they get about you is even more critical in these turbulent times when those over you come and go and you don't know who your immediate boss may be tomorrow. In the old days, you established long-term relationships and a long-term reputation. The management ranks changed more slowly. Now you have to make sure from time to time that people know your worth.

CASE STUDY *Ralph*

Overcoming Career Stereotypes

Ralph used to be the head of a marketing department before he joined Lavaloc. Now he is in charge of all advertising—a smaller position—and doing a good job. Management here forgets that he used to have much broader responsibilities and could contribute more than he currently does. For example, he could be on a task force to market a new Lavaloc product or have another area reporting to him, such as the direct-marketing department.

Over time, Ralph became so frustrated that he was thinking of writing a memo to personnel to let them know that he had come from a bigger job. Or, he thought about asking for a formal meeting with his boss and his boss's boss. Memos and formal meetings are often good techniques for getting ahead. This approach is discussed in another chapter. But an Eight-Word Message is usually a lot less risky. Ralph decided to try it. His message was: "I used to be head of marketing."

When Ms. Dolan, the division head, was in the proverbial elevator, she predictably said, "Hello, Ralph, how are you?" Ralph responded, "The energy in this place is just terrific. It reminds me of the energy at Galomar." She inevitably had to comment, "I forgot you had worked at Galo-

mar." This gave him the opportunity to say, "Yes. I was the head of marketing there." If appropriate, he could have elaborated.

Ralph's goal, at this point, is simply to remind people that he has a broad background. Later, he can change the message. And, at some point, he may even formally approach someone about being on a task force—once he has established a different image of himself.

Giving These Messages to Bosses

Part of the trick of managing your message is figuring out who your *bosses* are. You probably know who your immediate supervisor is (although in some companies it may be hard to tell), but who are the other people senior to you who can influence your career? Most people come up with a list of 6 to 10 people senior to them. The list could include your boss's boss, some of your boss's peers, or your boss's boss's peers. It could also include a few people outside your organization, such as the head of an important industry association, your boss's peer in another company, or someone considered a guru in your field. These are the people you want to consider when you have an important message to get across.

You can't constantly send out messages every time you run into someone and you'd look like an idiot if you kept saying the same thing. You may, for example, want to send a message that supports your boss or your group, such as "I think we have the best audit team in the industry."

Decide what message you want to send and to whom you want to send it. *Make sure your message is appropriate.* In the course of promoting yourself, make sure you do not undermine your boss or say anything negative about others. You are simply trying to manage your own career.

*I don't want any yes-men around me.
I want everybody to tell me the truth even
if it costs them their job.*

Samuel Goldwyn

Managing Relationships at Work: Bosses

Most people do not lose their jobs because of incompetence but because of poor relationships at work. By definition, work relationships can be divided into those with people who are at a higher level than you (bosses), at your level (peers), or at a lower level (subordinates). Of course, you must also have good relationships with clients, but we will not deal with that here. Your career can be completely derailed by a boss, a peer, or a subordinate—but in very different ways. On the other hand, your career can be greatly enhanced by learning how to communicate well with the people in each of these categories—again, in very different ways.

In this chapter, we'll take a look at the instructive examples of two people who totally ignored the importance of having good relationships up the line. And they each suffered the consequences.

CASE STUDY *Frank*

About to Be Fired

Frank's story is a common one: He forgot that it was his job to please his boss. Frank was the person in his company responsible for supporting computer departments all over the world and his work was excellent. He and his boss, Mr. Williams, received many letters of commendation from happy clients who appreciated the work Frank did. However, Frank thought his boss was stupid and nasty and deserved to be ignored. He would not tell his boss what he was going to say at meetings. What Frank said usually caught his boss by surprise, which gave Frank pleasure. When Mr. Williams gave him an assignment, Frank was sure his boss was wrong and did it his own way. Sometimes Frank's clients agreed with him and sent more letters praising him. This only encouraged him to ignore his boss further.

Frank was doing such a great job that he was ready to have his duties expanded. He wanted new assignments and a promotion. In fact, Frank thought he should report directly to his boss's boss. Because Frank served his clients well and did his job well, he thought that was enough. It wasn't. Frank was in trouble. He was about to be fired, but Mr. Williams thought Frank was worth saving and that some executive coaching could help change his attitude and behavior. Mr. Williams arranged for Frank to see me.

When I discussed the situation with Frank, he was adamant about not showing respect to his boss as a matter of principle. Why should he defer to someone he thought was inadequate and who treated everyone so horribly? It had become a point of honor with him.

To keep his job, Frank first had to accept the fact that he was in trouble: He had no chance of reporting to his boss's boss; he was not going to get new assignments, given the way he was acting; and I couldn't emphasize enough that he was actually going to lose his job if he didn't change. The turning point came when he saw it was possible to develop a good relationship with his boss *without* giving up his principles or his rapport with people in the field.

A subordinate cannot possibly know all the various pressures that affect his or her boss's decisions and therefore is not the best judge of whether a boss's requests are valid. If your boss says a certain assignment is the most important thing for you to do, you are in no position to second-guess him or her—in effect saying no. I told Frank I know from personal experience as a manager that I don't want to always have to explain to my employees why I want them to do something. At some point, I get tired of explaining. Sometimes when I say something is very important, I simply want them to do it.

As we continued our counseling sessions together, Frank came to see that his point of view was not always accurate and perhaps it made sense to pay attention to the boss. If Frank didn't learn to deal with this boss, he would probably

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have the same problem with the next one—who might simply fire him rather than *trying to help him* as this one was doing.

What could Frank do differently? He could find out his boss's priorities, let his boss know his agenda before he went into meetings, and send his boss a copy of all memos (or show him the content of sensitive memos before he sent them). But even if Frank kept making these little changes, how could Mr. Williams tell if Frank was simply trying to placate him or if he had seen the error of his ways and had a real change of heart? Over the course of time, Frank's boss would have to watch carefully for signs of Frank's true intentions: Was Frank still trying to undermine him or was Frank now supporting him? This situation would create a lot of pressure on both of them.

Making subtle changes at this point would not be enough. Frank's boss was too frustrated. Instead, Frank would have to do something more radical so his boss could see clearly that his attitude had indeed changed. Frank could make more dramatic and consistent changes in his approach, such as overtly deferring to his boss at meetings. An effective alternative would be actually to tell his boss that he had made a conscious decision to change and he was determined to become a new person. Then, even if his changes were not dramatic, Frank's boss would recognize the true significance of all those small changes: Frank is now a different person. Things *will* be better in the future.

To let Mr. Williams know that he'd had a change of heart, Frank needed to communicate a very simple message: "I was wrong. I've changed." So Frank said to his boss, "I can see now that I've been wrong. I'm sure you have plans I don't know about. I will make sure I do what you want and also let you know my agenda before we go into meetings." Now Frank was consistently asking his boss for feedback on things he planned to do and filling him in before they went into meetings. He developed a good relationship with Mr. Williams. After a few months, Frank got a number of new assignments. After a few more months, he got a promotion. Frank is still working for the same

boss, but now he loves it, and Mr. Williams is as happy as can be.

According to the market paradigm, one's boss is really a major customer rather than an authority in the old sense.

William Bridges, *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs*

CASE STUDY *Melanie* Getting Un-Fired

Melanie, an advertising manager, had already gotten fired. She came to me because she wanted help looking for a job. Her employer had offered her only a few weeks of severance pay and no outplacement help and she had not quite moved out of her old job. Because she would have no income except unemployment compensation, I asked her if she would like to try to stay with her present company. She reminded me that she had already been fired. I explained that it takes a lot more effort to change jobs than to attempt to stay where you are. If we put the new strategy into effect right away, before our next weekly session she would know whether or not it was working. It might not do the trick, but it would take relatively little effort. Would she like to try it? She said she would. After all, what did she have to lose?

I asked her to tell me about the situation in more detail. She was an account manager in an advertising agency. She and the creative director, slightly higher up than she was, disliked each other intensely. She admitted she had caused him a lot of problems. In fact, she had irritated a number of important people, including her boss and the president. Melanie first had to make a list of the people to whom she needed to make amends, decide what she should say to each person, and plan the sequence of this campaign to save her job. She also needed an overall theme to her campaign—a brief message that she could fall back on whenever things seemed to be going poorly in her discussions. Her pitch was: "I've

loved working here. I want to stay." That's all there was to it—only 8 words.

You should be able to sum up the main idea you want to convey in about 8 to 10 words. Naturally, depending on the context and conversational opportunities, the way you express the message will vary and may call for a few more words. But your message has to be simple since you will repeat it like a mantra during these discussions. When things are going wrong and people are attacking you and saying things you didn't expect to hear, just keep going back to your pitch. If you don't have a main message, the conversation can go off in all directions. You can spend a lot of time defending yourself or rehashing old scenarios.

Melanie met with her boss. She said, "I know I've made mistakes and have irritated a lot of people. But I'm a changed person. I've loved working here and I want to keep my job." Her boss replied by naming lots of things she had done wrong. She agreed with him, said things would be different, and added, "I've loved working here. I want to stay." When she met with the creative director, she said she was sorry for any problems she had caused in the past, but promised she would support any creative ideas he had in the future. She said she now realized this was part of her job. She added, "I've loved working here. I want to stay." She did this with four more people and within two days found she was back in the fold. Not only did she get her job back

but she was assigned to the company's most important account!

Melanie had bought herself some time until she could decide what to do. She had turned things around so she actually could stay if she wanted or she could leave when she was better prepared. She soon found another job and then resigned. But she resigned on very good terms with everyone in the company. They were all sorry to see her go.

This technique of telling someone you have changed—if indeed you have—is very powerful. The key to its power is not only in what you do afterwards, but in *saying* that you have changed. But there is no use in saying you have changed if you haven't. You will not be able to get away with it. They *are* looking for change. And it will only make the situation worse if you try to con them.

Stories about career crises are interesting and dramatic. However, it is better to manage your career to prevent the kind of crises you may bring on yourself. You don't have to wait until things get critical. You can make corrections at any stage. First, assess your situation. Make a chart of everyone in the organization with whom you have contact. Think through what your relationship is with each person and what it should be. If you are in danger of losing your job, make a plan. The most effective ways to buy time for yourself are to make a dramatic change that takes the pressure off you and to deliver a concise and consistent message.



Avoiding Career Crises

*The pure and simple truth is rarely
pure and never simple.*

Oscar Wilde

Getting the Impossible Job Done— and Getting Fired

Gloria had been fired from her job even though, by her own estimation, she was doing a superb job. She had accomplished a dramatic turnaround, growing a division that had floundered for 20 years into a billion-dollar business.

But to reach that level of success, she had stepped on a lot of toes. That was only part of the problem, however. She had not spoken to her boss for more than two years. As she ignored him and went about reaching her goals, he bided his time and eventually got rid of her.

Bosses may give you an impossible assignment. But if you have left too much destruction in your path as you reach your goals, they will hold it against you. Now Gloria had to learn to act differently or she would fail in her next job, too. In fact, her job search was not going well because hiring managers sensed something was wrong with her managerial style. Gloria was convinced there was something wrong with all of them. It took Gloria a year to accept that she had a style problem and needed to make changes in her attitude and behavior. When she changed her attitude, she was able to attract employers who valued her business skills.

George, on the other hand, had an excellent relationship with his boss and had learned to coach her tactfully. When he saw a situation that might prove dangerous to his boss, George would warn her, give her information, and make her look good. People like George tend to be valued and rarely get derailed.

The employee-vendor relationship to his or her customers is something like professional/client relationships in the past, but the difference lies in the pace of change. Traditional professional/client relationships were not change-driven. They developed slowly over time, and they settled into mutually satisfying patterns of complementary activity and reward. Today, however, change occurs so quickly and so constantly that customers, both inside and outside the organization, always need something they don't have.

William Bridges, *JobShift: How to Prosper
in a Workplace without Jobs*

Peers: They Can Help You—or Not

Kari, an executive from another country, had a cultural problem. Of her 10 peers, she spoke only to two. According to Kari, the others were not smart and she considered them a waste of her time. In her old country, which had a strong class system, it was acceptable to pay attention to certain people and snub others.



"If I have to be at these boring meetings, I might as well get something out of it."

Kari's bosses had heard enough complaining from her peers and they resented having to deal with this ongoing problem.

When Kari realized her attitude was a cultural issue, the solution was clear. I explained to her that in this country you should at least appear to get along with everyone. You don't have to spend time with them or have brainy discussions, but you do have to say hello and be cordial. For your boss's sake as well, develop good relationships with your peers. Kari began to loosen up and smile. She even found that she liked a few of those she had formerly shunned.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

Romans 12:6

Look at Your Relationships from Your Boss's Point of View

Steve had a problem with his peers. He was brilliant, but as you have already learned, this alone

is not enough. He was not about to lose his job, but he had hoped that his competence would be enough to warrant getting promoted to be head of his group. Instead, it was obvious to management that he and his peers did not get along and they announced that they were hiring an outsider to become head of the group. Now Steve wondered what he had done wrong and he faced a new problem: How should he act around his new boss and how could he protect his job, since a new boss often wants to select his own team?

I told Steve that he had indeed messed up in the past because he hadn't seen things from his boss's point of view. He bickered with his peers and complained to his boss about them. Even when Steve was *right*, he was deeply resented and his peers wasted energy trying to prove he was wrong. Obviously Steve was part of the problem, not part of the solution. His boss simply wanted people to cooperate. Steve had missed an opportunity to enhance his value as a leader by making a situation worse.

In general, managers want to promote someone who will be a popular choice with their peers. Management does not want to risk losing anyone because they promoted an unpopular person.

Look at situations from your manager's point of view. Cultivate relationships with your peers. You don't have to go overboard, but do be friendly, share articles or other information that may interest them—and ask how the weekend was!

If you are strong and smart in your own job, give credit to your peers when credit is due. Show respect for their efforts. In meetings, say, "I think Jane did a superb job on that project." And let them know some of the things *you're* working on. Then, if you become the boss, they'll know that you'll give them credit, share information, and respect what they do.

A study done by the Center for Creative Leadership showed that happier people tend to get ahead. The people at the top of a hierarchical organization are the happiest and the people further down the organization's ladder are less

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happy. The Center believes happy people rise to the top. Out of every group, from the lowest level in an organization to the highest, there are happy people and these are the ones who get promotions. They tend to get along better with others, volunteer above and beyond the call of duty, and simply put more energy and thought into their jobs. If a manager has a choice between promoting the person who is enthusiastic and pitches in or the person who walks around unhappy and complaining, she will certainly select the former.

A study of recent college graduates who got jobs—as opposed to ones who did not—showed that the ones who were most enthusiastic landed the jobs. Even at the most senior levels, that enthusiastic approach carries some weight with hiring managers. That is why it is important to find a job you enjoy doing and that you also do well. You are more likely to stand out among peers who are complaining and dissatisfied.

Even though Steve had a bad relationship with his peers for many years, it was not too late. He made a list of all of his peers, noted what his relationship with each one was and what he

wanted it to be, and then took action. He quickly patched up every relationship—especially by acknowledging others' accomplishments. By the time the new boss came in, human resources was very involved and wanted to make sure each person accepted the new boss, as this was a major transition for the company. Steve had an opportunity to stand out. All of his peers told human resources that they resented an outsider coming in and they deserved the job. Steve, after having been coached, said positive things about the new boss and added, "I'm looking forward to working with him." Steve didn't get the boss's job, but he did make a good impression. He moved his career forward by being assigned to special task forces—and he had a more pleasant time at work.

*You've got to get up every morning
with a smile on your face,
And show the world all the love in your heart,
Then people gonna treat you better.
You're gonna find, yes, you will,
That you're beautiful as you feel.*

Carole King



The Quarterly Exercise

*Woe to him that is alone when he falleth,
for he hath not another to help him up.*

The Wisdom of Solomon—Apocrypha

Every three months, make a list of your bosses, peers, subordinates, and clients. As mentioned earlier, *Bosses* are people at higher levels who can influence your career. Don't go strictly by the organizational chart. *Bosses* would include your boss and your boss's boss, perhaps some of your boss's peers, and maybe even one or two people outside of your organization who are in the position of influencing your career. Remember: *Influencers* may even be in other geographic areas.

Most people have 6 to 8 bosses. Make a list of yours on the worksheet.

Each quarter, go through your list and ask yourself: "What does this person think of me and what *should* they think of me?" If your bosses forget that you had extensive marketing experience before you took this job, you can easily remind them of this. If they have not noticed that you have been working 70 hours a week on an important project, make sure they know.

Always know your Eight-Word Message so if you run into a boss in an elevator you can quickly slip it into the conversation, however brief it may be. You have many opportunities to communicate with people more senior than you, but you have to plan your communication. This is a way to manage informally the impression senior bosses

have about you. Don't let something build up until it's a major problem and you have to ask for a formal meeting. Instead, manage your internal public relations as you go along.

- For bosses, ask yourself, "What do these people think of me and what *should* they think of me?"
- For peers, ask yourself, "What is my relationship with each of these people and what *should* it be?"

Now, **make a list of your peers—usually 12 to 14 people who are at your level.** Here again, you are not simply plucking the names from your division's organization chart. Certain peers may work right up the hall; others may be in other cities, departments, or divisions. Review the list every quarter and ask yourself, "What is my relationship with each of them and what should it be?"

You don't have to take everyone to lunch or go out for drinks! Often, simply saying "hello" is all it takes to have a decent relationship. Or perhaps you want to ask certain people how they enjoyed the weekend or the status of a major project. With others, you may want to exchange information about the projects on which you are each working.

If your peers are out of town, you may have to pick up the phone for a brief chat. The relation-



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ship you have with your peers is critical to your success. And having a good relationship usually takes very little effort.

In addition to reviewing your relationships with your bosses and peers, also make a list of your *subordinates* (those at a lower level than you in the organization). These may include your secretary or your boss's secretary, for example. Do you treat your subordinates well? Do they complain about you to their bosses?

Also make a list of your clients—those you service inside or outside your organization. Most people are conscious of focusing on their clients, so that may not be an issue for you. However, to be thorough, make a list of these as well and review your list at least quarterly.

**Names of *Bosses*,
Their Impression of Me, and
My Plan for Each**

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

**Names of Peers
and My Relationship with Each**

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____

My plan for developing relationships with my peers:

Barbara Walters: And you think you will walk again?
Christopher Reeve: I think it's very possible I'll walk again.
Walters: And if you don't?
Reeve: Then I won't walk again.
Walters: As simple as that?
Reeve: Either you do or you don't. See, it's like a game of cards and if you think the game is worthwhile, then you just play the hand you're dealt. Sometimes you get a lot of face cards, sometimes you don't. But I think the game's worthwhile. I really do.

Christopher Reeve, former star of *Superman*, in an interview with Barbara Walters.

