

Communication must start before a crisis hits the fan

Friday, August 07, 2009, Cristina Muntean

After sturdy economic growth over the last decade, many Czech managers are now learning for the first time how to massively lay off people and communicate difficult business decisions to their subordinates.

According to Karin Genton-L'Epée, managing owner at L'Epée Coaching & Consulting and a Prague-based business coach, the key for success in such situations is to be in control of our emotions and build communication networks long in advance of their use becoming necessary. A company whose employees remain engaged even in times of economic downturn could transform this into a strategic asset when the crisis settles down.

It is, however, all about management. As the economic slump forces deep reflections about the mistakes which led world economies to the brink of collapse, this interview is the second part of a series of talks that reflect upon changes brought about by the ongoing crisis in the style of leadership and company management in the Czech Republic. The first interview, ([“Smart leaders should use the crisis to get ready for the future”](#)) dealt with how Czech managers must get ready for the after-crisis scenario. The last interview will discuss how managers need to learn to control their emotions and transform them into creative energy, even in rough economic times.



Karin Genton-L'Epée, Photo: Jakub Hněvkovský

Genton-L'Epée has been living in Prague for the last 15 years and has been working as a business coach for the past 11 years. Besides business coaching, she is also a speaker at various seminars on personal development and leadership. Genton-L'Epée is the organizer of Business Power Lunches, a series of meetings aimed at inspiring professionals to move their careers in the right direction.

Q: Usually, a company's top management is the first to be able to foresee a crisis. How should these first perceptions be communicated to middle management and regular employees?

A: Well, top management isn't always the one to foresee a crisis. Very often, the top manager doesn't see it and it will be the one on the floor who is the first to notice the impact. It really depends on the company and the product. If you're selling goods, the person who sells is the one who will see how often and how quickly goods are sold.

Q: Let's assume we're in an industry where the top management is the first to see a problem coming. What is the best way to communicate it to subordinates?

A: The best way to start communicating is not on the day of the crisis. Unless you have already established a communication channel and a good relationship with the people before the crisis, this will be difficult. But you can try to communicate on the day of the crisis as late communication is better than no communication. That's one difference with 'swimming' [e.g. learning to be a leader before a crisis hits the company]—communication can be learned pretty fast. The problem is that most people don't know what to say in time of crisis. But once they are aware of what needs to be communicated, it's a lot easier.

Q: What does it mean knowing how to communicate?

A: Knowing how to communicate means being able to share information efficiently. And during a crisis, efficient communication is strongly associated with honest communication. In all blogs right now, everyone speaks about the importance of honesty. But as much as I believe honesty is crucial, you still have to package your communication. Between saying: you're fired, which is a bit abrupt, and—listen, we need to talk because there is something going on and this is what's going to happen—while the meaning is the same, the impact is quite different.

However, I still believe people usually prefer brutal honesty than not knowing anything. The biggest challenge for people going through this crisis is not to know what's going to happen. While some say as long as I don't know, I don't have to worry; most people dislike the unknown as it makes them feel insecure. And today, between e-mail, Twitter, Facebook and all the social media tools that are out there, keeping a secret is a pretty big challenge. I wouldn't bet too much that any changes in a company can be kept quiet unless you keep it to yourself. The best secret is the one that you don't tell anybody.

Q: What is the best way to communicate a sensitive message to middle management and make sure it reaches regular employees in the shape you intended?

A: Everybody has their own way; there is not a right and a wrong way. The smart way is to understand what people need in times of crisis. At most, people need to be reassured. Every time someone is facing a sense of insecurity, they need to be reassured first. It all depends on the industry and on the capacity of the manager to do so.

First, people who are going to communicate the bad news need to be in control of their emotions. I'm not saying controlling their emotions, but to be in control of their emotions; to master them. If you can't be in control of your own emotions, you'll have a hard time communicating in a reassuring way. There is nothing more contagious than emotions.

When the French football team loses the World Cup, the whole country feels they lost the World Cup. When the Czech hockey team wins, the whole country wins. People need to identify how they feel about what is happening, and then understand that everyone around them will feel how they feel. The next step is to find a way to reassure people. For everyone, it's a different method—we all have a different way to deal with insecurity.

There isn't one way, but the issue is always the same—people need to know what's going to happen to them and whether they have options; and they need to feel that the information is communicated to them as honestly as possible.

Q: We can see now that many companies are changing goals or even their focus of activity. How can a manager effectively motivate employees to focus on new goals?

A: It's like anything else—managers can motivate employees as long as the vision is clear and people understand why the company is embarking on a new direction, especially in the Czech Republic.

The French can be stirred into almost any direction, provided that they like the boss and there is something for them to put their teeth into and be smart about. French love to think about problems. Even if it doesn't go anywhere, it's OK, they enjoy the intellectual challenge. With Czechs, it's a different issue: The Czechs need to know why the company's goals have been changed, and if it's not useful, practical and meaningful, they will resist.

The best chance you have to change direction and have the team following you is if you communicate very clearly the benefit of that. If you want to be even more efficient, make sure to tell the people how they can contribute [to the change]. Sometimes this might take more communication skills than most managers have. This might also be too much effort for them—for many managers it is easier to be directive and say 'do it' than to figure out the best way to convince someone to do what needs to be done.

Q: What would be the other way of dealing with such situations?

A: To realize that even though the 'do it' approach seems to be logical and rational, it offers a limited range of options. As companies continue to struggle with the economic turmoil, a growing number of communication experts argue that the recovery is conditional on the balance of innovations offered by the right brain with the left brain set of skills most managers have. While men are known to be more comfortable using their left brain to fix problems, the latest trend has put a strong emphasis on the use of the right brain for cooperative communication.

By combining the left brain skills with the right brain insights, managers will have a chance to think more broadly about the communications challenges they are encountering on a daily basis and solve some of these issues in a more unique and creative way. The goal is not to think harder but to think smarter, to be willing to shift from the comfort zone of the left brain into uncharted right brain waters.

Q: How can you effectively communicate a tough decision such as laying off a large number of people or closing a factory down?

A: If you have a good relationship with your team and they trust you, it's not so complicated. But if you start to stand up all of a sudden and they don't know who you are and they've never heard of you, then you will have a big challenge because they won't believe you.

We are going back to building the relationship: if you have spent time prior to the crisis to build the relationship with your team, they will listen to you and follow you. But in times of a booming economy, we don't think about that. You need to build relationships and communication, and work on those skills from the beginning, and if not from the beginning, then at least some time before the whole economy crashes. Though, even when the economy crashes, we would still have some time but it would be more painful.

Q: What role does company culture play in effective communication during times of crisis?

A: A phenomenal one. It's the company culture that sets up the standards. The company culture establishes the value system. Companies that are going into trouble but prepared to really act on it and create [something new] will be the companies people will want to work for. Companies must walk the walk. So, yes for company cultures, but they have to be created and implemented; you don't just put five nice values on the wall and say: we stand for integrity, communication and something else; these values must be demonstrated on a regular basis.

Q: Do you think company cultures will become more important in the future, after this crisis?

A: Not really, this is individual to everyone. The companies who have a good corporate culture will reinforce it. It's like paying attention to our physical and mental health: when we are in a good shape while many people are struggling with some serious issues, we can say maybe what I'm doing is working.

When our brain tells us that what we do is working, we should continue doing it. The problem comes when our brain tells us what isn't working but we keep doing it. So, yes, if it works, fine; if it doesn't work, it is time to use our brains and start to pay attention to what is going on; reflect and think about what needs to be changed.