Defend Your Research

HBR puts some surprising findings to the test

Effective Managers Say the Same Thing Twice (or More)


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The finding: To get employees to do something, managers need to ask them at least twice.

The research: A team led by professors Neeley and Leonardi shadowed 13 managers in six companies for more than 250 hours, recording every communication the managers sent and received. The researchers discovered that one of every seven communications by the managers was completely redundant with a previous communication using a different technology. They also saw that the managers who were deliberately redundant moved their projects forward faster and more smoothly.

The challenge: If we communicate clearly, do we really still have to repeat ourselves? Isn't that inefficient? **Professors Neeley and Leonardi, defend your research.**

Neeley: We know that the effective managers repeated themselves at least once, and we often observed managers who sent three or four redundant communications. We saw some clear patterns with regard to who did this and how. For example, we divided our managers into two types: those with formal power and those without it. We found that those without power planned their redundant communications and that frequently very little time passed between their first message and their second.

HBR: They actually intended to say the same thing twice from the outset?

Leonardi: It was very deliberate. One manager we observed worked on an e-mail for 20 minutes right after explaining his request to the employee in a conversation. He not only was aware of the redundancy but took the time to make sure the two communications said the same thing.

Neeley: Managers with power, however, were redundant in a more reactive way. We found that they think they can tell people what to do just once, but the lack of an adequate response forces them to send a redundant message.

Were both approaches equally effective?

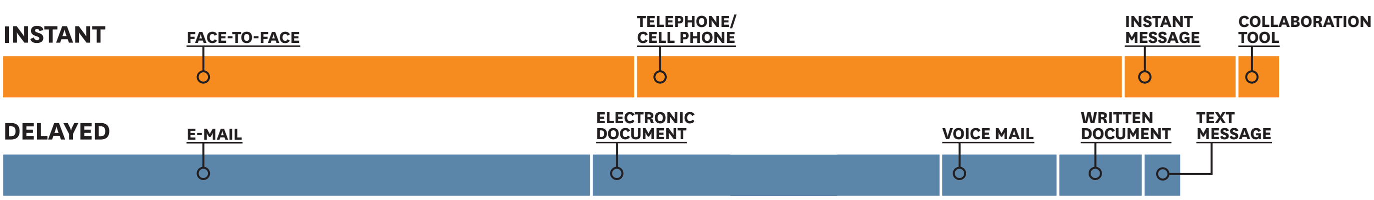
Neeley: Managers without power who were deliberately redundant moved the needle faster. The managers with power got as much done, but it look them longer, and they spent more time doing damage control or in crisis mode because they'd assumed their requests were being fulfilled before realizing they needed to follow up.

Leonardi: We don't have data showing that one group outperformed the other on meeting project deadlines or budgets. But we saw a difference in how employees responded to the two groups when it came to liking and respecting managers versus getting annoyed by them. People had more esteem for managers without power.

Does technology play a role in all this? It's so easy to bombard people with messages now.

Neeley: Only partly. What's equally important is that the nature of work has changed. We've moved toward project-based teams. We form them, work, disband, form new

THE MEDIUM OF THE MESSAGES
Face-to-face meetings and e-mail were the most popular forms of communication used by managers.



Repeat to Succeed

Managers without formal power sent more redundant messages than managers with formal power, but also got tasks done faster and with fewer hiccups. Managers with power appeared to assume employees would fill their requests and had to deal with more blow-ups when they didn't.

PERCENTAGE OF MESSAGES THAT WERE REDUNDANT

21% SENT BY MANAGERS WITHOUT FORMAL POWER

12% SENT BY MANAGERS WITH FORMAL POWER

teams, and so on. You end up with team leaders without much management experience and also less trust in those leaders. The social and organizational dynamics are such that you can't just tell people what to do anymore. They may not work for you.

Leonardi: We're so bred to believe that clarity is the key to being a better communicator. The literature says pick the best medium for the job, and anything else is wasteful. This research suggests that's not true. You need to use multiple media. It's not necessarily just about clarity. It's about making your presence felt. Employees are getting pulled in many directions and reporting to lots of people and getting tons of communications. So how do you keep your issues top of mind? Redundancy is a way to do that.

Managers complain about information overload all the time. Now we find out they're creating it by being redundant!

Neeley: All the technologies available—phone, e-mail, instant message, shared folders, WebEx—increase the frequency of communication. Redundancy helps your message get through lots of messages. Gives it more weight. I also believe managers have started strategizing on how to be redundant. Those in our research also seemed to be selecting different media pairings to achieve different goals.

What patterns did you see?

Leonardi: Managers with authority started with a delayed communication—one that may not be received right away, like an e-mail or voice mail. When things didn't get done, they'd shoot off an instant communication. Managers without power did the opposite. They started with an instant communication, often a face-to-face conversation, and then followed up with a delayed message. Think about it: Managers with power assume their authority motivates others. Managers without it need to get buy-in, so their first message is for motivation. The follow-up is to document something, remind people they've made a commitment so that it doesn't fall off their radar.

Neeley: We noted a qualitative difference in the content of the messages, too. As you might expect, managers without authority did not use directive messages as much. They used persuasion more.

Were managers surprised to hear that they were being redundant?

Leonardi: If anything, they would look at us as if to say, "Seriously, you think this is interesting? This is how it works. Of course I follow up with another message."

Tell me what's next in redundant communication research.

Leonardi: Fatigue is an interesting question. Is there a redundancy threshold? Will people eventually say, "Enough—stop communicating with me"?

Tell me what's next in redundant communication research.

Neeley: [Laughs] The other thing that would be fascinating is to see how this behavior spreads. Are the employees who receive the repeat messages picking up those norms? Do they do it at work? In their personal lives? And going forward, what will that mean?

HBR Reprint F1105D