

# COMMUNICATION MEASUREMENT AS A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL: A MCDONALD'S RESTAURANT SYSTEMS CASE STUDY

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**Traditional employee communication surveys offer benchmarks and measure progress, but generally do not provide diagnostic information for identifying how to improve results nor do they pinpoint how to encourage employees to accept accountability for their role in the communication process. This case study explores how to make communication research more actionable, using the McDonald's Restaurant Systems annual employee communication survey as an example.**

The McDonald's Restaurant Systems employee survey process involves developing a survey questionnaire that includes a combination of target behavioral outcomes (i.e. employees feeling informed) and possible key drivers (i.e. employee communication skills). We ask employees to identify their department head on the questionnaire, so that we can provide survey data showing how individual departments perform on the drivers compared to others in the organization in addition to generalizable data for the overall business unit. We then conduct a correlation analysis to indicate the drivers with the greatest potential to impact employee scores on the target outcomes.

In our McDonald's example, the correlation analysis gave clear direction that the communication effectiveness of department officers correlated very highly with our target outcomes. However, employee ratings of their officer's communication effectiveness ranged from 30% to 94%. Our key driver analysis allowed us to specifically suggest the skills officers needed to develop to improve their communication effectiveness. We communicated recommendations for improving communication through customized reports prepared for individual officers and collateral materials about survey results for employees. Survey results quantified how officer communication effectiveness facilitated informed and positive employees, as well as suggested which officers needed to improve their communication and the particular skills they most needed to develop.

When the newly created McDonald's Restaurant Systems department asked employees if they had the information they needed in a 1997 staff survey, fewer than half responded positively. Determining how to help them get that information most effectively became an immediate priority.

While our case study here focuses on the McDonald's Restaurant Systems department as a specific example, the

approach and diagnostic tool discussed is relevant to any corporate communication setting seeking to maximize employee motivation and productivity.

Restaurant Systems is responsible for supporting McDonald's

## Do your employees have the information they need to do their jobs well? If not, do you know how to help them?

five U.S. geographic divisions and restaurants in the areas of operations, menu, supply chain, restaurant development and training standpoint. Restaurant Systems' executive management considers communication to be critical to driving the department's business strategies. If Restaurant Systems employees do not feel well informed, they will have difficulty ensuring that restaurants nationwide have the optimal facilities, equipment, ingredients and training they need to maintain McDonald's high standards.

That first survey's results provided direction for a communication plan and a baseline for subsequent measurement of employee knowledge. A traditional communication measurement approach would stop there, with future surveys measuring progress against the original benchmark. Those pulse checks would establish whether the internal communications team was making progress, but would not inform communications staff about why they were or were not progressing. Without knowing the "why," communications staff can not be certain where to focus effort and energies. Perhaps progress is due to a revised newsletter, more frequent staff meetings, or another factor.

The process did not stop there. Now that we had established

baselines with our original survey, we set out to make the survey process more action-oriented. To be most effective, we knew we needed to go beyond tracking progress in order to understand the catalysts behind changes in employee awareness so that we could focus resources on the strongest communication strategies. In addition to learning how many Restaurant Systems employees felt informed, we also wanted to identify why they felt that way and specifically what could be done to increase their knowledge levels. We also recognized that communication extended further than the traditional vehicles managed by the internal communications team and included all 361 members of the Restaurant Systems department.

As in any organization, communication within Restaurant Systems is a combination of formal and informal processes. Formal processes involve the organization's internal media, including vehicles created by the internal communications team such as newsletters and all-staff meetings. Informal processes extend beyond the daily scope of the internal communications team and involve Restaurant Systems' employees, who cascade information up and down through their immediate supervisor and ultimately a company officer in each department, using vehicles such as voicemail, e-mail, and face-to-face meetings. While we could change the contents and timing of our newsletter in response to survey feedback, for example, we couldn't directly control how often supervisors passed information onto their staffs or how effectively they worded their voicemails. Communication in Restaurant Systems would become effective only if we could determine how to improve both formal and informal communication processes.

Our challenge became expanding the survey's evaluative scope, providing diagnostic information that would identify how to improve results and help employees to feel personally accountable for their role in the communication process. For example, if we determined that officer communication skills facilitated informed employees, we would also want to identify which officers needed to improve their communication and what individual skills they most needed to develop.

## Identifying What is Moving the Needle

Our first step toward recognizing how to improve results meant enhancing our research design to identify the key drivers of our target outcome of informed employees. This process involved revising the original Restaurant Systems survey questionnaire to include a combination of target behavioral outcomes (i.e. employees feeling they have the information they

need to do their job well) and possible key drivers (i.e. officers and supervisors considered effective communicators).

The questionnaire's target behavioral outcomes reflected ideal conditions that would enable the organization to achieve its business goals. For example, one outcome would be that Restaurant Systems employees receive the right information at the right time so that they can make the right decisions to support the restaurants in the field. The questionnaire's list of potential key drivers included 18 communication attributes and skills from studies conducted in other companies and reported in the literature of organizational communication.

These questionnaire modifications enabled us to conduct a correlation analysis to uncover the most significant key drivers that affect the target outcomes for employee communications. Among the highest correlations with the target outcomes at Restaurant Systems were supervisors and officers rated as being "very good or excellent" at communication.

The next step involved identifying individual communication skills that served as the top drivers for effective communication among officers and supervisors. This deeper level of analysis enabled us to answer an officer or supervisor who asked us, "What do I need to do to improve my communication?" We advised officers and supervisors about what skills they needed to develop to become the most effective communicators and ultimately create more informed employees. As the list below indicates, the top driver for officers was having supervisors who are effective communicators. If an officer employed a supervisor with strong communication skills, employees were likely to view both the supervisor and the officer as effective communicators.

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### Top Key Drivers For Officers

1. Effectiveness rating of supervisor
  2. Holds regular team meetings
  3. Presentation skills
  4. Use of e-mail
  5. Always tells the truth
  6. Keeps me informed
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Top drivers for supervisor communication effectiveness involved more interpersonal interaction than those of the department officer. Strong supervisor communication scores meant being available on an ongoing basis.

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## Top Key Drivers For Supervisors

1. Communicates often enough
  2. Provides accurate information
  3. Keeps me informed
  4. Creates two-way communication atmosphere
  5. Delivers information face- to-face
  6. Provides feedback
  7. Makes time for you
- 

## Helping Employees Feel Accountable

Part two of the communication survey's diagnostic scope involved helping employees feel personally accountable for their role in the communication process. We addressed this by asking employees to rate themselves, their supervisor and their department head on the comprehensive list of 18 communication attributes and skills considered to be potential key drivers of informed employees. We also asked employees to identify their department head on the questionnaire so that we could provide survey data by department.

This approach enabled us to prepare customized reports for each department leader, showing how his or her department performed on survey areas compared to others in the organization. The approach allowed us to track results of department heads for comparison with the prior year's data.

Overall, our diagnostic tool quantified how communication skills and resources lead to informed employees and indicated which departments in particular needed to improve their communication and the specific skills they needed to develop to do so.

## Using Survey Results to Improve Communications

It should come as no surprise that communicating findings is critical to the success of a diagnostic communications research tool. Like many organizations, McDonald's staff felt "over surveyed," and did not always see results or actions implemented once surveys were complete. We communicated our survey findings with an emphasis on advising employees about what they could personally do to improve communication and overall employee knowledge. Our communication of survey results focused on two levels: across-the-board recommendations for the

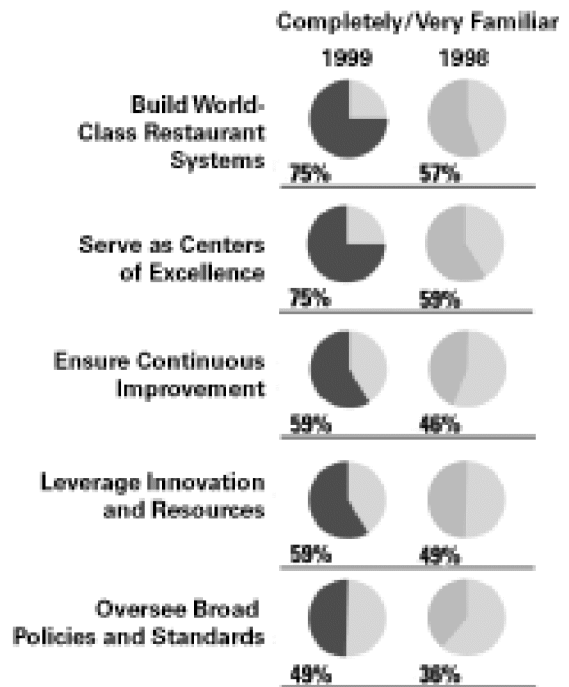


Exhibit 1. Familiarity with Restaurant System Objectives

overall department, as well as suggestions for individual departments within the business unit. Overall, the diagnostic survey and tools outlined below for communicating survey results would be appropriate for any corporate communications setting where action needs to be taken based on communications research.

Within Restaurant Systems, the internal communications team utilized the department's information cascade to share survey results. Initially, we reviewed report results individually with each officer. Officers then shared the results with their staff and worked with them to develop action plans for improvement. The internal communications team offered resources and coaching to officers and their staffs, including one-on-one presentation coaching and suggestions for using communication vehicles.

Survey results were summarized for all employees with a booklet that included the key drivers of communication effectiveness identified by survey results to help employees improve their own communication. Since survey results suggested that Restaurant Systems employees wanted help with a communication protocol for using the department's growing number of communication vehicles, we developed a pamphlet that included suggestions on using vehicles, as well as best bets for effective communication.

The Restaurant Systems research also identified an important opportunity for improving overall communication through

supervisor communication skills. The correlation analysis indicated that supervisor skills were even more important to employee attitudes and knowledge than were officer skills, however, employees rated actual supervisor skills as lower than officer skills. This data suggested room for improvement in supervisor communication skills; and indicated that putting efforts behind the improvement of supervisor communication skills; would have an even stronger effect upon target employee outcomes. To address this opportunity, we organized a focus group of department supervisors to discuss how they communicated with employees. The focus group led to the development of a Restaurant Systems Supervisor Communications Team charged with improving supervisor communication skills.

## Measuring Success

To track progress over time, the organization's internal communications team established goals prior to each annual survey. The goal-setting process involved examining what had occurred within the department since the most recent survey. For instance, if there had been a reorganization, we knew from our research that an influx of new department leaders and supervisors could certainly have an impact upon how informed employees were feeling. Goal-setting also involved input from senior management on their expectations as well as consideration of new departmental key initiatives.

When all factors were considered, appropriate, measurable goals were set.

For example, the 1999 Restaurant Systems survey had four objectives:

- To measure progress on specific goals set against six key measures established following the 1998 survey
- To maintain or improve upon 1998 findings in the

remaining areas of the survey

- To be similar to or exceed normative data in our supplier's database
- To identify key drivers of communication skills that had the greatest potential to impact employee scores on target knowledge and attitudinal outcomes

The chart below shows improvement in key measurements of communication effectiveness over a three-year span of conducting the survey. Note that the number of employees who felt they receive the information they need to do their job well increased from 47% in 1997 to 79% in 1999. Communications staff met or exceeded all 1999 goals established in critical areas.

Throughout the survey, results remained consistent or improved in almost every area. Significant declines occurred in only three out of 63 measures that were repeated from 1998.

The chart below demonstrates that significantly more Restaurant Systems employees described themselves as well-informed in 1999. This well-informed percentage exceeded

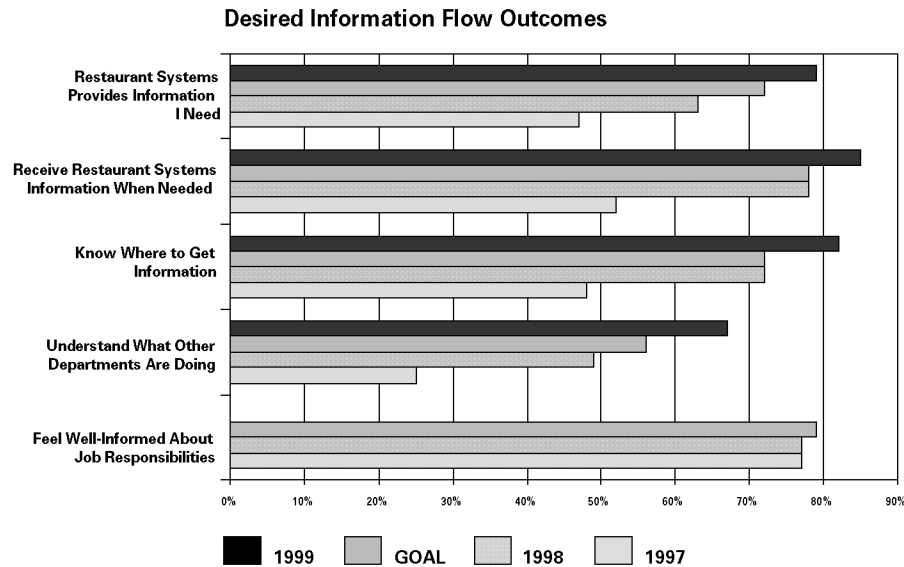


Exhibit 2. Desired Information Flow Outcomes

the goal established for Restaurant Systems in this area and is also double the amount on this measure in the supplier's normative database of survey results from 12 other companies. In fact, Restaurant Systems employees were more positive than employees in the supplier's database in all areas in which such data is available.

The data clearly show that the overall communication effectiveness of department officers and supervisors correlates highly with the target outcomes. Most of the officers evaluated in 1999 demonstrated effectiveness rating increases ranging from 8% to 32% over 1998 scores. These findings suggest that efforts to improve officer skills following the 1998 survey were successful

and contributed to an overall improvement in knowledge and attitude among Restaurant Systems employees.

In addition to meeting and exceeding all quantitative goals, the survey also resulted in the bottom line target of all communication programs: changing behavior. Restaurant Systems officers, supervisors and staffs report increased efforts to cascade communication in their departments through behaviors such as increased passing on of voicemails, holding more (or less) frequent meetings and initiating "brown bag lunch update sessions." The value they place upon information sources has also multiplied dramatically.

In fact, one of the strongest indicators of our diagnostic tool's success comes from the Restaurant Systems officers. They have added the survey's communication effectiveness ratings to their departmental evaluative scorecards, reflecting the high regard they hold for communication and the value they believe it adds to their business.

We should note that one effect of this new kind of measurement is that it generates an increased demand for involvement from the internal communications department. Once people see the potential for improving communication and the rewards that follow, they are eager for counsel from their internal communications experts.

The McDonald's Restaurant Systems Employee Communications Survey has become an annual diagnostic tool, with officers and their employees anticipating the opportunity to measure their progress.

In fact, one department within Restaurant Systems doesn't want to wait a year to obtain results. This department conducts a mid-year pulse check, a miniature version of the Communications Survey that measures its progress thus far. The internal communications department assists this department and others within the business unit to maintain and further improve com-

munication processes and skills.

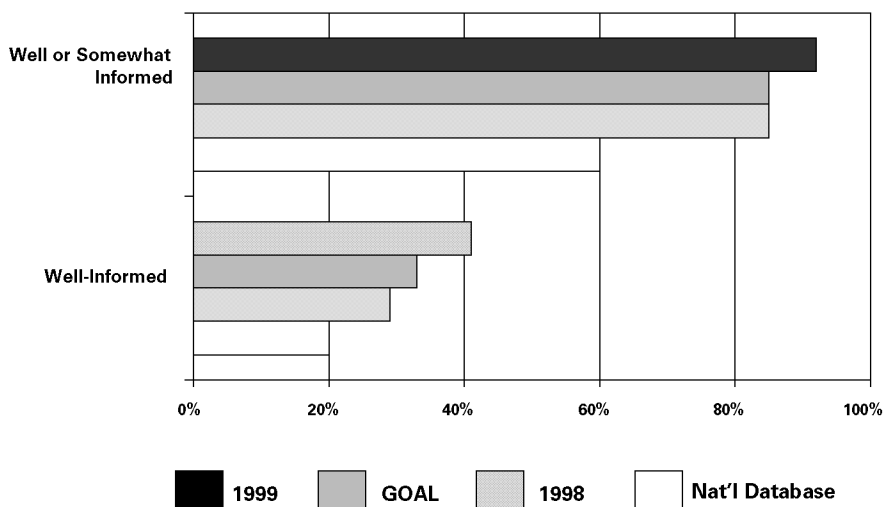
As a result of the diagnostic Employee Communications Survey, the Restaurant Systems internal communications team knows that employees have the information they need as well as how to use communication to achieve critical outcomes. The survey is a diagnostic tool appropriate for any corporate communications setting interested in effectively strengthening employee performance in order to meet organizational goals.

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**Feeling Well-Informed About Restaurant Systems**



**Exhibit 3. Feeling Well-Informed about Restaurant Systems**

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