



## Inarticulitis

*"Paralysis of the portion of the psyche governing clear, complete communication, usually caused by fear."*

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This month we begin another 3-part series. Our topic is **Working Effectively with Nonproductive Employees**. We open up the topic with a reprint of one of Mary Jo's most popular articles.

Long hours of laborious research have finally revealed the cause of supervisor's dread of communicating clearly and completely with employees. It is an obscure condition called inarticulitis, characterized by paralysis of the portion of the psyche that governs straight-forward communication. Its usual cause is fear of the reactions of others.

Why don't supervisors 'say it like it is'? Very simply put: it's not safe!

Recently, I worked with a manager in the McGrath SUCCEED course who said the best way to avoid a fight at summary evaluation time is to put a batch of neutral phrases in the word processor and distribute them randomly among the employee evaluations. "That's how I contain the damage caused by saying something the employee might not like," he told me.

Another administrator highlighted the result of this 'fear of communication' when he said, "The only way to tell the difference between competent and marginal employees when reading the formal evaluation summary is there are fewer superlatives."

Fear of communicating (particularly in writing) isn't an individual phenomenon. We all suffer from some degree of inarticulitis. We don't want to upset people. We don't want to rock the boat.

If you find yourself sandwiching remedial input between warm fuzzy phrases and diluting assessments of substandard performance with 'sweet nothings' you're suffering from inarticulitis.

Until we find a cure for inarticulitis, supervision and evaluation will not be effective tools for change.

In the current cultural climate we have for communication, most administrators and supervisors fear that clear, direct communication about deficient performance will destroy their relationship with employees. That is particularly true when the communication is written. Writing is perceived as a sign of trouble. It is seen as more significant, concrete and permanent than an oral conference. Inside this "box" there is no such thing as documenting for success. You can only document for disaster!

Often, we institutionalize the fear of 'putting it in writing' by separating ongoing supervision from evaluation. Most supervisors agree that about 95% of all supervision of employees is done informally. What makes the supervision informal is that communication is entirely oral. No written accountability record is made. Information on the employee's performance is recorded only at formal observations. Consequently, 95% of the interaction between managers and employees can't

be referred to as the factual basis for the summary evaluation.

Sometimes, a supervisor will refer to an issue in conclusory terms on the summary evaluation. When challenged by the employee and the union representative, a written record of the facts to back up the conclusion does not exist. A grievance is brought, a request is made that the evaluation be withdrawn, and the manager ends up looking slipshod and unfair.

But even after being "shot down" for not having written back up, he doesn't make a priority of keeping ongoing notes of supervision and sharing them regularly with employees. Why? Inarticulitus!

"But," (you may say), "I do keep notes. I have a file in my desk for each person I am supervising and I write things down." I know some supervisors keep anecdotal records and use them effectively. They take careful notes of observations, then share them promptly with employees in oral conferences and written memoranda. But for many of us, the notes are just a pressure relief valve. Writing them lets off steam but doesn't get to the source of the problem.

A supervisor recently told me, "When I see a problem, I make a note and put it in my file. I fully intend to take the matter up with the employee soon. But I notice that I'm putting that note on top of a lot of other notes. At the end of the year, most of them are still there."

That manager feels he has taken concrete action by notating the issue. In reality, he has simply avoided a confrontation. Inarticulitus strikes again.

For years, I have worked with administrators and supervisors to create a new paradigm of communication. Effective communication builds working relationships; it does not destroy them. It has a powerful impact on employee performance.

This new paradigm of communication is embodied in the McGrath SUCCEED System. SUCCEED provides managers with a "user friendly" system for communicating with employees. Its proven effectiveness and fundamental fairness gives managers confidence that their communication will be supportive and useful for the employee. It provides access to a new paradigm of instructional leadership through effective communication that can end the paralysis of inarticulitus forever.

*Editors' note: This article is general in nature and is not intended to replace professional, legal advice.*

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