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Closing the GAPPP: Increasing Your Internal Influence with Confident Communication

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Abstract

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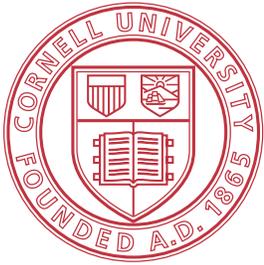
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☆☆☆☆ Closing the GAPPP:
Increasing Your Internal Influence with Confident Communication



Cornell University
School of Hotel Administration
The Center for Hospitality Research

Closing the GAPPP:

Increasing Your Internal Influence with
Confident Communication
CHR Tool #5

by Judi Brownell, Ph.D.,
and Daphne Jameson, Ph.D.



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**CLOSING THE GAPPP:
INCREASING YOUR INTERNAL INFLUENCE
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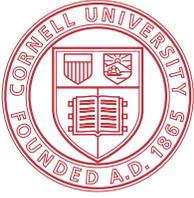
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Executive Summary

CHR Tools for the Hospitality Industry

CLOSING THE GAPPP: Increasing Your Internal Influence with Confident Communication

by Judi Brownell and Daphne Jameson

MANAGERS FACE BOTH GOOD AND BAD NEWS when they attempt to communicate their vision and standards for their business. The bad news is that managers often cannot tell when, how, and from what sources employees receive their information about a business's practices and procedures. The good news is that

managers can use the tool presented in this report to analyze the ways and means through which employees receive their messages and thus ensure that important communications are received. The tool, *Guide to Aligning Present Practices with Possibilities*, or GAPPP, helps managers create a specific communication plan. GAPPP analysis has two steps. The first step is to survey employees to develop an accurate profile of information patterns. Step two involves analyzing the survey results against a series of questions that form a guide for designing an

action plan that addresses employees' communication habits and preferences.

In the case of service quality, for instance, a study of a hotel in the northeastern United States found differences in how managers communicated compared to the ways in which employees typically received information. For instance, the study found that women were more likely to gain information from written materials than were men. Moreover, different ethnic groups received information in different ways. While native English speakers benefited from

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oral explanations of service quality issues, spoken instruction did not work so well for non-native speakers. As one result, the hotel created visual templates for housekeepers to show them where amenities should be placed. Non-native speakers were also helped by written materials. Interestingly, one other finding was that the hotel's general manager was a closely

watched and influential source of information about the meaning of quality service.

Having inventoried employees' preferred communication sources and channels, a manager can adjust current communication practices to align with the way employees receive information-keeping in mind that clarity may require several channels.

Closing the GAPPP:

Increasing Your Internal Influence with Confident Communication

by Judi Brownell and Daphne Jameson

THE VISION IS CLEAR: You want to distinguish your property on the basis of service excellence. The goal is set: You want every employee to provide quality service to your guests, every time. Now your real challenge begins.

How do you communicate those service standards in such a way that you can be sure that they are understood and maintained throughout your organization? You know that some departments seem to operate smoothly while others struggle with misunderstandings, inconsistencies, and missed opportunities. What makes the difference? In many cases, it may be a communication gap. This report gives you a tool, which we call GAPPP, or the *Guide to Aligning Present Practices with Possibilities*, to analyze communication-failure issues. Armed with findings from this analysis, effective communication

strategies can be developed that ensure the right messages are reaching the right employees and achieving the desired results.

Our research has confirmed that you can write memos, hold meetings, and provide training programs, but employees still may not be getting your message. The reason is that you may not be using the communication channel that works best for them. Employees don't necessarily pay attention to messages just because management thinks those messages are important. The following are two hypothetical examples of this challenge.

The food and beverage manager may believe that she's communicating regularly with her employees as she walks around the dining room pointing out specific service issues, but do servers and kitchen workers report that they are getting sufficient information from her? Do they understand how important quality service is to the restaurant's profitability? Do they know and follow the procedures she's been emphasizing for months?

The reservations manager may be sending out numerous memos or emails to front-desk employees, but is anyone actually reading them? Those announcements on bulletin boards, the company newsletter, the morning briefing—why is it that despite all those exhortations, employees too often don't look up at the guest, don't smile, don't seem to get the message?

The fact is that employees have strong preferences regarding how, and from whom, they receive their information. While you may believe that you have communicated effectively because your writing is clear or your meetings are well attended, you may be in for a surprise. Most employees pay attention to only a small portion of the messages swirling around them.

Communication in Organizations

Organizations spin elaborate and often delicate webs of communication. The strands that connect various individuals and departments, strands that link one organizational level to the next and that bridge boundaries of culture and experience, are often difficult to identify. Although elaborate charts may represent your organization's formal structure, such diagrams are unlikely to be accurate reflections of how information really flows in your club, restaurant, or resort. Employees learn about "how things are done" in a variety of ways—direct and indirect, formal and informal, and intentional and unintentional.

Only when managers develop and implement effective communication strategies will employees' actual behavior reliably reflect man-

agement's vision. By identifying the formal and informal channels through which employees learn about key organizational concepts, and by recognizing the sources of information on which they depend, you will be better able to tap into these systems in your efforts to ensure that all employees actually receive the information they need.

Guide to Aligning Present Practices with Possibilities (GAPPP)

The GAPPP analysis presented in this report helps you discover exactly how your employees acquire the information on which their decisions and behavior are based. The first step is to survey your employees, so that you can develop an accurate profile of when, how, and from whom they receive specific types of information. In step two you analyze the survey results based on a series of questions that will guide you in designing an action plan that takes into consideration your employees' habits and pref-

GAPPP analysis helps you discover exactly how your employees acquire job-related information.

erences as you make choices about the sources, channels, and timing you use to communicate critical information. The outcome of these two activities—the GAPPP Employee Profile and the Management Action Plan—will be to directly improve communication effectiveness in your team, department, or organization.

GAPPP Analysis: A Study of Who, How, and When

We will illustrate GAPPP analysis and its usefulness by discussing a study that was conducted to explore the communication of service-quality concepts at a 250-room luxury hotel in the northeastern United States. While every organization is different and the results you will

see here may not directly reflect what goes on in your workplace, this case will help you appreciate the insights that can be gained from this assessment tool. In this particular situation, as often happens, managers had become frustrated with their seeming inability to create a strong, shared service culture. They were in search of an approach that would help them “work smart” to increase the effectiveness of their communication activities.

Researchers and senior managers were interested in determining the primary sources, channels, and timing regarding how employees came to their understanding of what service quality meant within the context of their specific

While property managers were relying on printed materials for communication, employees were learning from the actions of senior staff.

job and department. With this information, managers could see where and how their current efforts were missing the mark and could tailor their strategies to communicate service-quality concepts more effectively. Results of the study would indicate the extent to which current communication practices were having the desired effect and whether employees were relying on the sources and channels that managers believed to be effective. More important, these results provided a solid foundation on which management could plan future communications.

Step One: Administer the GAPPP Employee Survey

The GAPPP Survey asks employees to respond to a series of items relating to three primary areas of interest. Responses are made using 7-point Likert-type scales that allow respondents to indicate the strength of their agreement with each statement. In this study, our focus was on service quality. Consequently, our three primary areas of interest were the following:

1. *Who* talks with you about service quality?
2. *How* do you learn about service quality?
3. *When* do you learn about service quality?

To gauge the sources of employees’ service-quality information, for instance, hotel employees were asked, “How much of the information about quality service did you learn from the general manager? Your direct supervisor? The orientation manual? The standards posted next to the freezer? Fellow employees?” Employees were also asked to indicate how much of this information they gained from meetings, memos, emails, formal training programs, their peers, observing colleagues, or other means through which information is shared (see the GAPPP Employee Survey, Appendix 1, page 12).

Let’s take a look at what this particular study revealed and how the results were analyzed so that management could better understand current employee behavior and could therefore target their communication strategies more accurately.

Step Two: Analyze and Act on the Employee Survey Results

One hundred and forty-three employees participated in this study, with a gender division of 55 percent men and 45 percent women. Most of those completing the survey came from one of the following six departments: accounting, bell staff, food and beverage, front desk, housekeeping, and stewarding. Nearly 20 percent of those who responded were not native English speakers. Summary findings are presented in Exhibit 1.

An analysis of these results provided critical insights to the managers, enabling them to make immediate improvements in their communication effectiveness. After examining the specific information reported in Exhibit 1, we derived the five insights listed below. Each insight provided guidance for management in creating a property-specific action plan. A summary of the recommendations that were made and the actions that were taken follow each insight.

Insight One: Organizational communication practices were not completely aligned with employees' information-seeking behavior.

In reviewing the summarized GAPPP survey results, senior managers recognized immediately that their communication strategies often were not consistent with the sources, channels, and timing that employees actually used to acquire their information. For instance, while property managers had spent a great deal of effort developing print materials, it appeared that employees sought most of their information on service quality through other channels. In particular, line staff looked to their senior colleagues to model appropriate service behaviors and to show them how to respond in unexpected situations.

Action: In this case, it was relatively easy for the organization's communication practices to be brought more into line with employee behavior. Assistance was provided to middle managers to increase their effectiveness in coaching and on-the-job training. In addition, an employee mentorship program was established to explore the ways in which those with significant job experience could be recognized for helping to develop their junior colleagues. These efforts represent just a few of the steps taken to increase the use of neglected communication channels.

Insight Two: Ethnicity influenced the degree to which employees used communication sources and channels.

In this property, some of the greatest differences in the use of communication channels and sources occurred between native English speakers and those for whom English was a second language. In examining responses to the first question, it appears that non-native English speakers talked less to their family, friends, and potential guests about service-quality expectations than did other employees. Along that line, non-native English speakers and women were the only subgroups to indicate that they received more information about service quality from their direct supervisor than from the general manager. The most significant differ-

EXHIBIT 1

Summary of findings from the quality-service study

The results below (from the case study described in the text) illustrate the type of information you might gather from your workforce. You can then plan an effective communication strategy.

Background Information

- Approximately even numbers of men and women (55 percent men and 45 percent women).
- Twice as many employees as managers.
- Respondents represent a variety of departments (one can examine responses by department).
- Employees were highly satisfied with service provided by their departments, and even more satisfied with the service provided by the hotel.

Who talks with you about service quality?

- The GM ranked first overall by the total sample, followed by direct supervisor.
- All respondent groups except women and non-native English speakers rated the GM first. Women and non-native English speakers rated their direct supervisor highest.

How did you learn about service quality?

- Informal oral channels were ranked highest. Watching other employees ranked first, followed by watching supervisors.
- Written channels and highly structured oral channels (training programs) were used less frequently than were informal oral channels.
- Managers gain a great deal of information from being a guest at the property.
- Women gain more information from watching others than do men.
- Women pay more attention to written messages than do men.
- Among comparison groups, differences between the native and non-Native English speakers were greatest. Specifically, non-native English respondents learned significantly more from formal channels such as policy manuals and memos than do their counterparts, who rely on picking up cues from observing their more experienced coworkers. Differences between ratings on memos and meetings were particularly striking.

When did you learn about quality service?

- The total sample ranked "on and off over a long period of time" first. In particular, non-native English speakers gave high ratings to "on and off over a long period of time."
- Supervisors indicated that they learn about quality service more quickly than do employees.
- Women indicated that they learn about quality service more quickly than do men, gaining significantly more information during the interview and the first six months.

Gender differences

- Women tend to gain much more information from watching others (both other employees and managers).
- Women tend to rely more heavily on written communication (both manuals and memos) than do men.

ences, however, were in channel choices and the degree to which the two samples relied on written messages, meetings, pre-arranged conversations, and coaching for information on service quality. In each case, non-native English speakers were more dependent on these formal channels than were other employee groups.

Action: Department managers demonstrated considerable creativity when they were provided with accurate information and asked to respond to this challenge. For instance, housekeepers for whom English is a second language may benefit from communications that have a strong visual component. Therefore, the clarity of key messages was increased by such actions as graphically illustrating the placement of amenities and the proper folding of sheets rather than simply describing the desired outcomes. In addition, periodic department meetings were replaced by more frequent and informal briefings which ensured that all employees were clear on their responsibilities and requirements. Another action that was recommended,

Different groups of employees had considerably different communication preferences.

based on survey findings, was the creation of a formal mentoring process, or buddy system. With increasing globalization, insights related to diversity issues are particularly important as demographic differences are likely to affect the success of your communication strategies. Repeatedly, managers must make decisions about how best to communicate with employees whose backgrounds, expectations, and styles may be dissimilar. Non-native speakers of English, older workers, and people from various cultural groups may vary significantly with regard to the manner in which they learn your company's policies and become familiar with its culture.

Insight Three: Reward systems were not aligned with organizational priorities and did not encourage employee responsiveness to key communications.

Survey findings revealed the extent to which employees gained information through various sources and channels. This feedback enabled management to identify problem areas at both the individual and department levels. It became clear that some employees or units would require additional effort to ensure that their attention was focused on key messages. The desired outcome of any intervention would be to better align employees' actions with management's expectations and for all employees to recognize the benefits of maintaining high service standards.

Action: While the hotel we studied did not take any immediate action, there are a number of actions that could be recommended based on survey findings. First, employees who exceed expectations and consistently meet quality standards can be recognized for their achievements through public acknowledgment of their performance. Some of these individuals might be given opportunities to serve as a coach and mentor to their peers. Examples of service excellence would therefore become part of the organization's culture. Appraisal systems and other organizational processes can further reinforce excellence. In many high performing organizations, managers who support and develop their employees are themselves recognized and rewarded.

Insight Four: The general manager was one of the most powerful sources of information and served as an effective role model for employees.

Findings from this survey supported previous research suggesting that effective organizational leaders "walk the talk"; they are on the floor, communicating with employees and modeling "best practices." Findings from this GAPPP analysis show that commitment is influenced by the degree to which employees perceive top management as both inspiring a shared vision and modeling that vision. Survey results

indicated that the general manager, as well as those in middle management and supervisory positions, appeared to be effective in their efforts to communicate service standards to their employees on a regular basis through both actions and words.

Action: No immediate action was required other than for the GM to continue as a source of information and vision.

Questions to Create an Action Plan that Puts GAPPP Results to Work

Your employees have completed the GAPPP survey and you have the results. Once employee responses have been summarized and interpreted, you can begin to plan an effective communication strategy, just as the hotel management did in our study presented above. Rather than base your communication activities on past practices or on convenience, you will now be able to make informed decisions based on insights gained from employee responses. You might begin by asking yourself questions like the following:

- (1) How do current communication practices compare with employees' source, channel, and timing preferences?
- (2) Specifically, what sources and channels are underused by employees? Why might this be the case?
- (3) What sources and channels do employees seek that could be more fully used by managers in getting their messages across?
- (4) What else can be done to strengthen, supplement, or improve current communication practices?
- (5) Are there employee groups that may require special efforts to match their communication needs and current choices?
- (6) What obstacles may prevent employees from paying attention to the organization's messages?

- (7) What reward systems are in place that will encourage employees to continue effective communication practices?

To help you complete a thorough and systematic assessment, Appendix 2 (starting on page 15) provides a GAPPP Analysis and Action Plan for Managers. The answers to questions in this instrument, along with your responses to those listed above, will provide direction as you align your efforts and resources with employee practices.

Conclusion

Organizations can be viewed as elaborate communication systems. Your success in accomplishing your goals depends in large measure on your ability to select and apply the most appropriate and powerful communication practices to get the right messages to the right people at the right time. If you can identify your employees' behavior with regard to the sources, channels, and the timing of the communications on which they focus, and then use this information in the deliberate and mindful design of communication strategies, you will ensure the smooth and successful implementation of your vision. While we have focused on the communication of management's vision of service quality, the GAPPP tool can be applied to numerous other key organizational concepts or messages. Regardless of the topic, when you plan your activities wisely you can be confident that communication in your organization has the intended results, as in the hypothetical examples from the beginning of this report.

The food and beverage manager is confident as she walks around the dining room that her regular conversations with employees ensure that servers and kitchen workers understand the importance of quality service to the restaurant's profitability. All staff members know and follow the service guidelines; consequently, guests report high levels of satisfaction with their dining experience.

The reservations manager sends memos and emails to front-desk employees because he knows they can take the time to focus on written communication and do not need to rely exclusively on oral messages. Because he realizes that they look to printed documents for important information, he also puts announcements on bulletin boards and in the company newsletter. These messages emphasize the need to consistently meet service standards such as looking up at the guest and smiling during check-in. Guests now describe the front-desk staff as “concerned” and “friendly.”

Hospitality organizations confront continuous change as issues such as globalization, safety, technology, and market demands affect policies and practices. Hospitality leaders have been quick to understand the importance of articulating mission statements, defining ethical codes, and establishing strategic plans to guide them into an uncertain future. Putting any plan into place, however, requires an equal commitment to understanding when and how to communicate and to using the available communication sources and channels effectively. Only through ongoing assessment and the deliberate design of effective communication strategies can you ensure the smooth and successful implementation of your best practices. ★★★★★

Appendix 1

Employee communication survey

Dear Employee,

Quality service is key to guest satisfaction and to maintaining our excellent reputation. We are interested in learning more about how to achieve and maintain total quality. Specifically, we are interested in how you and your fellow employees talk about the concept of “quality service.” This information can help us to more effectively communicate service values so that you and your associates can work together to create and maintain excellence.

Your help is essential to the success of this effort. Please respond to each of the questions below. Your answers will be completely confidential. We will share findings with you and discuss the results as soon as they are available.

Thank you!

1. Who talks with you about quality service?
Circle the appropriate number.

	Never	Seldom	Often	A great deal			
a. my direct supervisor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b. other property managers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c. my fellow employees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d. the general manager	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e. guests staying at the property	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
f. potential guests or clients	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
g. my family and friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
h. Someone not mentioned above (please specify whom)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Continued at right

Employee communication survey (continued)

2. How have you learned about quality service at the xxx? Circle the appropriate number.

Learned Nothing Learned Some Learned quite a lot Learned a great deal

- a. through conversations arranged specifically to discuss service-related issues
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- b. through spur-of-the moment, casual conversations
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- c. by watching fellow employees
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- d. by watching property managers
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- e. by being coached by another employee
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- f. by training or coaching other employees
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- g. through classroom training at this property
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- h. through outside training seminars
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- i. through on-line training programs
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- j. by being a guest at this property
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- k. by being a guest at other hotels
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- l. by having worked at another hotel
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- m. through manuals or other printed materials
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- n. through memos or personal communications
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- o. from guest comment cards
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- p. from reports by paid independent evaluators
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- q. through internal e-mails
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- r. by participating in meetings
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Please list specific types of meeting(s):

s. by any other means not mentioned above

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Please list:

3. When did you learn about quality service at this property? Circle the appropriate number

Learned Nothing Learned Some Learned quite a lot Learned a great deal

- a. before I started by job here
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- b. during the interview process
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- c. during my first week here
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- d. during the interview process
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- e. during my first months here
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- f. on and off over a long period of time
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Have you attended training programs on service quality during the past year?

a. ___ no b. ___ yes

5. What printed materials have been the most useful in helping you understand expectations for providing quality service? Please list specific sources of information (for example, mission statement, on-line training manual, employee handbook, guest materials, brochures, newspaper or magazine articles):

6. How would you define "quality service" at your property? Write one or two sentences.

7. How does service at the xxx differ from service at other hotels? Write one or two sentences.

8. Please give an example (from your own experience or your observations) that illustrates quality service at the xxx:

Continued overleaf

Employee communication survey [concluded]

Background

(This information will help us interpret your answers):

1. Length of time at this property:

- a. ___ 6 months or less b. ___ 1-5 years
c. ___ 1 year or less d. ___ 6-10 years

2. Length of time in present position:

- a. ___ 6 months or less b. ___ 1-5 years
c. ___ 1 year or less d. ___ 6-10 years

3. Gender: a. ___ male b. ___ female

4. Is English your native (first) language?

- a. ___ yes b. ___

If no, what language do you speak?

5. Did you work at another hotel before joining this property? a. ___ no b. ___ yes

6. Overall satisfaction with level of quality service provided by your department

- a. ___ completely satisfied
b. ___ generally satisfied
c. ___ somewhat satisfied
d. ___ somewhat dissatisfied
e. ___ dissatisfied

7. Overall satisfaction with level of quality service provided at your property

- a. ___ completely satisfied
b. ___ generally satisfied
c. ___ somewhat satisfied
d. ___ somewhat dissatisfied
e. ___ dissatisfied

8. Your area or department:

- a. ___ housekeeping
b. ___ front desk
c. ___ bell staff/parking
d. ___ reservations
e. ___ laundry/valet
f. ___ security
g. ___ food & beverage
h. ___ concierge
i. ___ human resources
j. ___ banquet/catering
k. ___ engineering
l. ___ marketing/sales

9. Do you have supervisory responsibilities?

- a. ___ yes b. ___ no

If yes, for how many employees?

Additional comments, thoughts, suggestions?

Do you have a response to or comment on this report?

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Guiding Questions for GAPPP Analysis and Action Plan

Follow-up to the Employee Survey

To process the results of the employee survey, answer the following questions:

1. From whom do my employees get the most information about quality service? Why are these sources used most frequently? What are the pros and cons of information from each of these sources? Refer to the results from Question #1 on the employee survey.

Actions: What actions, if any, do I need to take to change the sources from whom my employees get information about quality service?

2. Through what channels do my employees get the most information about quality service? Why are these channels used most frequently? What are the pros and cons of each of these channels? Refer to the results from Question #2 on the employee survey.

Actions: What actions, if any, do I need to take to change the channels through which my employees get information about quality service?

3. At what times do my employees get the most information about quality service? Why are these time frames used most frequently? What are the pros and cons of each of these times? Refer to the results from Question #3 on the employee survey.

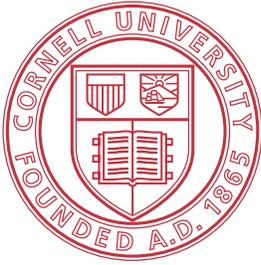
Actions: What actions, if any, do I need to take to change the times at which my employees get information about quality service?

4. What differences did the survey reveal about information sources, channels, and timing used by employees who differ in terms of gender? Ethnicity? Language? Age?

Actions: What actions, if any, do I need to take to ensure that all categories of employees receive sufficient information about quality service?

5. To what extent are employees' definitions of quality service the same as mine? Refer to the results from Question #6 on the employee survey.

Actions: What actions, if any, do I need to take to ensure that everyone defines quality service in the same way?



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