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IS YOUR FIRM READY FOR MEDIA RELATIONS?

This is a test that will gauge if you're firm's really ready to take on face-to-face-communications. Below is a list of 22 statements. Check only the spaces in front of each statement that apply to your firm's current communications situation.

Only check a space if you can honestly say "yes" to the question or declarative sentence in the statement behind it. Give yourself 5 points for each statement checked. Total your points and look at the summary box immediately below the 22 statements to find out if you're truly ready for face-to-face.

(This scorecard is based, on a case study of face-to-face communications at U.S. Cellular by David Murray, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Employee Communications Management*; and an article by presented by Ragan.com)

My firm and face-to-face communication

_____ 1. At any company, face-to-face must start with either (a) the CEO, or (b) one of the officers at the level immediately below the CEO, or it will fail. I can get the CEO or one of the four or five execs just below him or her to do this.

_____ 2. Face-to-face must be a consistent effort started very early in the CEO's tenure, and the effort must be unremitting throughout that tenure. These conditions apply where I work.

_____ 3. If your CEO is wavering about face-to-face, you or some powerful advocate must have frequent contact with him or her to press the case. At my company, I (a) have such frequent access to my CEO, or (b) know an influential officer who believes in face-to-face, trusts me, and has daily access to the CEO.

_____ 4. Face-to-face precedes and is the very life and foundation of employee engagement, NEVER the other way around. You just don't get engagement without a huge missionary effort in face-to-face first. At my company, we're not distracted by a big trendy campaign for "engagement" that means absolutely nothing. (This does not imply that all engagement campaigns are frauds.)

_____ 5. There must be a supreme effort of tact, diplomacy, intelligence, sincerity and sensibility by the CEO and his or her band of top officers if face-to-face is to have any chance of succeeding. (Employees will be suspicious, perhaps for months.) My CEO and the officers are such communicators: tactful, intelligent, and sincere.

_____ 6. The CEO must not only support face-to-face, he or another of the top hierarchy must be the most committed practitioner of it, the most faithful believer in it, or it will not be successful. He must

believe in it when no one else does. My CEO is such a person.

____7. The CEO must make the three or four top officers just below him into convinced enthusiasts of face-to-face, and they must attend all town hall meetings with employees. They must be as proactive as the CEO. My CEO can inspire her lieutenants with her own passion for employee communication.

____8. There comes a time in every face-to-face program when the expense and effort overwhelm even the believers. My CEO is not a “launch it and leave it to die on the vine” kind of exec.

____9. There must be at least as much listening and intelligent questioning of employees by top management in face-to-face meeting as there is delivery of top management’s messages to associates. My top officers will be good at listening and questioning at these meetings.

____10. Many town hall meetings with employees will be heavily Q & A, that is, top management asking questions of employees, and listening very carefully to the answers and taking notes. My execs can stand the ordinary town hall meeting format on its head without blinking.

____11. The main messages at face-to-face meetings by the top execs must be: “Tell us what we need to do to make your work easier and more efficient. Tell us what we must do to help you make our customer service better than anybody else’s. What are your biggest work problems? What can we do to help you solve them?” My company’s top execs can keep asking such questions until employees believe them.

____12. All written messages from the top must be well written, absolutely unambiguous, and FEW IN NUMBER. Their language must be simple and direct, without a trace of business jargon or the usual pretentious abstractions that make most business communication a contradiction in terms. My execs know how to talk and write plain.

____13. One of the first questions that must be asked by the top team: “Are employees getting too much communication through all channels? Should we put employee communication on a starvation diet, de-clutter and simplify our communications before introducing face-to-face? Are employees apathetic about *any* messages because they’re being pounded from all directions by non-stop information?” My execs and I can ask such tough questions and can cut the number of our newsletters in half, or by even more if necessary.

____14. There must be a direct, personal, 24-hours-a-day means of communication to the very top for ALL employees: either the telephone, e-mail, or a blog terminating in the CEO, who must answer every e-mail, blog, or telephone call from employees as soon as possible PERSONALLY. He must not skimp this duty, not one little bit of it. I guarantee my CEO can answer 25 messages a day, day in and day out, for a year straight.

____15. The CEO must not only tolerate, but welcome and civilly answer anonymous e-mails, letters, and telephone calls—even those that are unfair or harsh and condemnatory of his or her team’s management. My CEO is a big enough woman to do this without turning a hair.

____16. Managers must understand that when employees go over their heads to complain to or inform the CEO, that behavior is neither disloyalty nor criticism of the job they, the managers, are doing. Or, at the very least, managers must resign themselves to this feature of the corporate culture as vital to the

company's success and never take personally this going over their heads. We can bring middle management at my company to accept the idea that face-to-face is not a betrayal of them by the top officers.

____17. To make face-to-face work, the CEO must go to the Corporate Communications department and say, "I want you to help the front-line supervisors discover the practical applications of my messages by talking to their employees. Help the supervisors write up their suggestions to employees in plain English. We can't waste employees' time or patience in these meetings." I am ready and eager to help my CEO make these front-line meetings short, practical, and meaningful.

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____18. The top four or five officers must not communicate face-to-face too much; they must not appear to reinstate even a small channel of the oppressive torrent they’ve just abolished, nor should they wear out their welcome, or express a too-great familiarity with employees. Chumminess is forbidden—and fatal. My execs have the tact not to make employees sick of their faces.

____19. The CEO and his team must communicate to the employees solid business reasons for this enormous change in corporate culture, and their reasons must be unsentimental and unpatronizing. They must put the business case like this: “We can’t expect our customers to be happy if our associates are unhappy in their jobs. That would be stupid and doomed from the start. Therefore we must ensure that our associates like their jobs, feel respected by top management, and understand every last reason we have for doing anything as soon as we decide to do it.” My CEO can craft and deliver such a message.

____20. Face-to-Face can never be mainly cascading information down to the so-called “front lines.” That will inevitably fail. There must be an ascending stream of information and knowledge from the people in the trenches to the general staff at headquarters, and ideally this rising stream should be bigger than the stream coming down from the top. We can make water flow uphill at my corporation.

____21. Human Resources MUST measure face-to-face and rate employees on their face-to-face success in performance reviews. Face-to-face must become a criterion for bonus pay. Measurement must start no later than three months after face-to-face begins. This is perhaps the hardest part of the whole face-to-face program, and the most important, with the single exception of getting the CEO on board. Face-to-face MUST be reflected in people’s pay!

____22. Most often, face-to-face is derailed by a CEO who says, “I love face-to-face, but I just don’t have time to do it right.” I will have access to my CEO’s schedule, and I can prove to him that he devotes hours and hours a week to stakeholder communication right now, and that he can make space on his calendar to devote at least a quarter of his time to face-to-face.

If you scored

The recommendation is...

50 points or below

Forget it. Wait at least five years, or for a new CEO

55-60 points

If your CEO isn't at least interested in face-to-face, don't try it yet

65-70 points

If your CEO genuinely likes talking with the troops, give serious consideration to pushing hard for it

75-80 points

Is your CEO on the fence about face-to-face? What would it take to decide him or her to go for it?

85-90 points

Very good chance. Remember, you must get the CEO on your side in a big way

95-100 points

You don't need face-to-face, or you're already doing it—very well

105-110 points

Send us your telephone number and e-mail address, and get ready for some great press: We're dying to know how you did it!

avid Murray. "What Heaven Looks Like," *Journal of Employee Communication Management*, November/December, 2006, pp. 10-13. Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc.

Patrick Williams. *Making the Case for Face-to-Face*. (Chicago: Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc., 2006)