



connecting the dots between customers • colleagues • communities • results

Hallway Hellos:

What happens on the way to your next meeting speaks volumes

The first time I ever visited Africa I had a life-altering experience. It had nothing to do with the incredible wildlife or beautiful landscapes I saw. Those things were wonderful but what changed me was the people and most specifically it was the way they communicated with each other. I was instantly struck by how friendly people were. No matter where I walked I was greeted by whoever passed by me - on an isolated dirt road or in a fancy international hotel. I consistently received a direct eye contact, wide smile, friendly “Jambo” (Swahili for hello). I was told that in African culture it is considered very impolite and disrespectful to not greet everyone with whom you come in contact. It is the custom.... it is what people do to continually re-enforce the idea of community.

I vowed on the plane trip back home to Chicago to keep that custom alive. I pledged to change the world – one hello at a time - and begin greeting everyone I passed with an exuberant hello. My friendly exuberance was met with mixed reviews. Some thought I was crazy. Others were confused (do I know this person?). Many were clearly uncomfortable. A minority responded in kind.

As a communication professional, I have continued to pay attention to the difficulties we seem to have in our culture to connecting, casually, with others. Recently I toured the facilities of a new client - who I was working with to improve employee engagement - and immediately began to observe the communication that occurred, or didn't, as we wandered the hallways and walkways. Employees traveled to their destination with their heads down avoiding eye contact with others at all costs. Sometimes a cell phone or Blackberry served as an accepted shield signaling that the individual was occupied and should not be disturbed. If someone did catch another's attention by calling their name, they appeared to be awakened from a slumber and looked quite startled. This walkway observation gave me my first insights into how much work needed to be done internally to improve engagement, which is about having an emotional connection to the people you work with and the

company you work for. Employee engagement is that desirable end state where employees are willing and able to help their organization succeed.

How would you rate your organization on hallway hellos? How connected are your employees to one another?

Can changing the way people interact with one another as they walk through the halls of their office building really improve employee engagement? This brings up the age-old question of what comes first – the chicken or the egg? What I can say for sure is that what you observe in the walkways and hallways of your organization will tell you something important about how people feel and what they value.

The benefits of hallway hellos are innumerable. Can you remember recently when you received the gift of a friendly, sincere or energetic greeting from a colleague and how it made you feel? For me, it can put a smile on my face, brighten my mood, wake me up, jumpstart creativity, pull me out of a state of self-absorption, create an opportunity to connect with a colleague and stimulate endorphins to bring about a sense of well being. It can also transfer positive energy from the employee to the next customer with whom they may interact. If folks treat each other well, internally, that will naturally extend to the customer. At its essence, it connects you to others and builds community.

How can you make *Hallway Hellos* an organizational habit?

- **Hold a Hallway Hello Week.**
 - **Have fun** with what may be a challenging issue for many or simply a lack of awareness. For one week, ask employees to wear nametags and encourage them to greet one another by name as they run into each other in the hallway. Suggest that employees not only learn each other's name but also enquire into what their role is in the company and look for synergies.
 - **Encourage managers** to debrief the exercise in their staff meetings.
 - Was it easy? Difficult? Awkward? Why?
 - What did you learn about yourself / others?
 - How can we make this a habit rather than a one-week exercise?

- **Practice Close to Home**

- While my focus here is the workplace the same issue exists in our personal lives. We can live in a neighborhood for many years and still not know a lot of our neighbors. Practice greeting people while taking a stroll in the park, passing someone in the grocery store aisle or waiting in line at the bank.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “We say in Africa that a person is a person through other persons. A solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. We are made for togetherness, for friendship, for fellowship.” Africa is said to be the land of “ubuntu.” It is a wonderful Zulu tribe word that means, “I am what I am because of who we all are.” It communicates the idea that we share a universal bond – one that connects us all.

Know that I am not promoting excessive or gratuitous greetings but instead I am encouraging the awareness of the opportunity that exists within the simple gesture of saying hello. It is a small action that just may begin to have a big ripple effect within your personal life and with the well being of your organization.