

RUNNING HEAD: CONCEPT KEYS

Improving Training Outcomes: An innovative approach

Submitted by

William Powers, Ph.D.
Texas Christian University

Graham D. Bodie, M.A.
The GodwinGroup

And

Margaret Fitch-Hauser, Ph.D.
Auburn University

Abstract

This paper examines an innovative online training system based upon the established educational concepts of chunking and priming. This system, Concept Keys, creates a learning engagement environment that enables participants to integrate information into their memory and into their applied-skill base. As trainers and educators, developing such methods is paramount to the success of our training and teaching.

Likewise, success beyond college depends heavily on basic speaking and listening skills. Whether a student continues within academia or enters the workforce, s/he must possess the skills necessary to communicate in a competent fashion. By first looking at the relevant literature on the ability to teach basic speaking and listening skills and extending research in the areas of memory and cognition, a method is proposed for the educational arena that has been tested and preliminarily validated as an appropriate, yet innovative, way to teach the skills necessary to become a more effective communicator. Example exercises and ancillary classroom materials are also presented.

Concept Keys: A Pragmatic Approach to Skill Acquisition and Behavioral Competence

Professional trainers must be concerned about participant development. We are being paid to deliver improvement in the participants, improvement that allows the purchaser of our services to demonstrate a significant Return on Investment back in the workplace. It is our job to provide participants with specific skill sets necessary to operate in daily life. Many of us who emanate from the academic field of communication studies conduct training in what is known as the area of “soft-skills” development. This produces a continuing challenge. Our outcomes are regularly, and unfairly, compared to the outcomes obtained when training someone in “hard skills” such as operating a machine. Not only is the training challenge more difficult with soft-skill development but the degree of participant engagement and attitude toward improvement is difficult to assess as is the actual degree of improvement.

where widgets produced can be easily determined. Not only is it difficult to product significant change in a person’s communication behavior but there are inherent forces that limit our potential to be effective.

Two of the abilities that are tantamount to general occupational (Evers, F.T. & Rush, J.C., 1996; Zorn & Violanti, 1996), relational (Burlison, 1995; Flora & Segrin, 1999), and personal (Segrin & Givertz, 2003) attainment are effective speaking and listening. Part of the importance of these skills stems from the substantial amount of time spent engaged in communicative acts on a daily basis (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). A logical extension then would be to assume that the abilities to effectively produce, process, and respond to messages are necessary to operate in every day life. While it is largely agreed upon that students should be taught these skills two additional questions arise: 1) can comprehending (and displaying) a set of

skills lead to increased competence? and if so, 2) what is the best way to prepare an individual to become competent in speaking and listening? Both questions are addressed below in the respective order.

Skill Development as Predecessor to Competent Behavior

An ongoing debate within the field of communication is whether one can be taught how to produce and receive messages effectively (Dewit-Brinks, & Rhodes, 1992) and if so what is the best method (Duran & Zakahi, 1987; Watt, 1993). A main component of this debate is the recognition that simply having a cognitive skill base will not necessarily enable an individual to display an appropriate level of behavioral competence (Argyle, 1967; McCroskey, 1982). While skill refers to the communicator's ability to perform a certain behavior, competence is the actual demonstration of an appropriate communicative act in a given situation. While such discernment is theoretically necessary, practically speaking, one cannot behave in a competent fashion unless s/he has some base level of knowledge about how to act. In other words, competence does not happen (on a regular basis) by accident nor does it happen instantaneously. Rather, consistently competent individuals are skilled communicators and listeners who have developed those skills over an extended timeframe (see Greene, 2003 for a comprehensive review). To use the words of Hargie (1986), competence can be viewed as "skilled behavior" (p. 7). In order to behave in a social competent fashion therefore requires at least the presence of a base knowledge of skills in which to use to be viewed as competent.

In relation to learning, McCroskey (1982) claims that one cannot testify, "learning has occurred unless we can observe a modification of behavior" (p. 2). Aside from following a student's every move, the most viable way to instill behavioral change and resulting competence, is to rely on student testimony and innovative teaching techniques to establish a base level of

skills then employ novel testing methods to ensure students can relate that information to their inherently different lives and overall ways of communicating in general. Consequently, if message production and reception training is going to meet the needs of students, we need to develop innovative means of both delivering the message and inviting the active participation of the student. This system should be based on sound knowledge of how we learn.

The first step in the process of teaching an individual how to improve his or her competence in any area is to build that individual's cognitive base of skills that define such behavior. In fact, without a base of knowledge an individual will have no substance on which to base whether competence has been achieved. Several theories attempt to explain how individuals process information about the world around them, one of which is the concept of chunking.

Applying Chunking to Skill Building

The concept of chunking is largely attributed to the work of Miller (1956) who distinguished between bits and chunks of information. Chunking is the process of organizing and grouping bits of information into familiar units or chunks. The ability to chunk information helps an individual remember more and gives a means of accessing the information that is ultimately stored in his or her memory. More importantly, chunking increases “the amount of information we can deal with” (p. 95). Miller also suggests that we recode information constantly in an effort to assimilate new information with current knowledge. Therefore, the process of chunking also seems to serve as a mechanism for reinforcing information. For instance, as we learn new information, if it sounds familiar or if it fits into an existing category, we tend to remember and relate the new information to the existing category (Higham, 1997; Gobet & Simon, 1996b). This allows for more powerful connections to be made by the learner.

Chunking serves as both a triggering device and as a code-building device for our memory. The triggering aspect of chunks relies on the strength of a chunk or group of related chunks. Since chunks are arranged in a hierarchical fashion, the most memorable will consist of information that is most relevant to the individual attempting to learn (Servan-Schreiber & Anderson, 1990). Code-building is often accomplished through replication of chunks or related information that allows the participant to recall chunks for later use. As students build this system of codes (i.e. chunks) patterns begin to emerge with which the student is able to relate to other chunks and eventually build larger and larger stores of information (Koch & Hoffmann, 2000). Consequently, students are able to develop skills that are more complex than simple rules yet straightforward enough to be stored in memory.

Chase and Simon (1973) and Gobet and Simon (1996b) report that three areas of expertise are important in skill development: pattern recognition, selective searching, and “rich knowledge in the domain of expertise” (p. 2). In looking at the performance of master chess players, Gobet and Simon (1996a; 1996b) concluded that professional chess players seem to rely on chunking to categorize their knowledge and to access information. They seem to use their catalogue of information to look ahead and make strategic choices about what move to make next. It stands to reason that this concept can be extended to communication; if given a method of chunking information into useful categories, communicators should be able to build a knowledge base of skills and ultimately be able to access this information to make decisions about what type of skill they need to use in a given situation. Such a method should give students information that can be chunked as well as suggestions for ways to create these chunks. In addition, the system should build the store of knowledge about producing and receiving information. Finally, the system should provide a means of accessing the knowledge in a

meaningful way. Just as chess players seem to store chunks about patterns of pieces in their long-term memory, students need to store chunks about communication strategies and techniques in their long-term memory.

Another element that must be included in any effective training is repetition. Just as our memories are organized and stored in chunks, they are reinforced through repeated exposure to an idea, concept or skill. In one regard chunking provides an avenue for repetition insofar as the chunks are built as bits of information and compressed or integrated into a chunk. This is particularly evident in observations of certain ritualistic behaviors, such as many compulsive behaviors (Graybiel, 1998). Although message production and reception are not ritualistic behaviors, it stands to reason that we engage in these acts often enough that much of the skills considered necessary for communicative competence are performed in chunks. As we learn more skills, we seem to build cognitive and neural sequences that may help with the use of these skills.

Further research in the area of learning supports this conclusion. In three experiments on sequence learning, Koch and Hoffmann (2000) found clear support for the idea that sequence learning can be thought of as a chunking process. Students who are attempting to learn a series of related concepts can use their theory of “relational chunking.” By chunking information that is similar into large sequences of information, skills can be taught and competence in a certain area can be improved. A skill or set of skills, such those composed in what we typically judge individuals as effective communicators and listeners, can be thought of as a learning process in which the steps and concepts are presented in a sequential pattern. Once the pattern has been learned, the issue turns to how the individual can recall the concept for use when he or she has so much information in so many chunks stored in memory.

Using Priming to Recall Chunks

One theory that elucidates how information is recalled is priming theory. Priming, when viewed as spreading activation, works to retrieve information from memory when a priming stimulus is presented and sets off a chain of events in which one node of a concept is linked to another (Doshier & Rosedale, 1989; Ratcliff & McKoon, 1988). Ratcliff and McKoon (1998) suggest that:

the prime and the target concept form a compound cue and that this compound cue interacts with memory to produce a value of resonance, goodness of match, or familiarity that is determined by associations in long-term memory between the prime and target (p. 405).

Therefore, if the prime is directly related to the target concept, the individual will have an easier time recalling the concept as a chunk of information. This chunk of information, as related to communicative competence, should include both the appropriate behavior and the situation in which the set of behaviors should be used. If a training or instructional system could build such a pattern of association and provide a convenient chunking mechanism that was closely connected to effective communication skills, this information should be easy to access by triggering the associations.

Teaching Essential Speaking and Listening Skills

Continuing to seek new and innovative ways to educate students is paramount to teaching skills as important as speaking and listening. Strategic deviations from the formal classroom setting (i.e., lecture focused instruction) can incorporate a sense of practicality and fun, which can enhance learning. For instance, by making material seem personally relevant, students are forced to fuse new information with present knowledge forming a more thorough understanding

of the subject at hand. Thomas and Busby (2003) conclude that “self-managed learning” (p. 228) can foster independent critical thinking and increase competence. Thus this report introduces a focused approach to classroom interaction that blends the best of web-based education with the best of face-to-face instructor direction and support, Concept Keys (Powers, 2003). This approach provides students with small bits of information over a long period of time culminating in a vast store of knowledge about a set of skills and how to perform these skills in specified contexts. Along with daily commentary, or keys, this method has students rate these keys according to personal relevance. Additional classroom activities are also presented which add to the student-teacher interaction and increase the chances of information retention and skill acquisition.

A Chunking Theory Application to Improve Communicative Quality

Concept Keys (CK) represents a recent innovative approach to learning communication skills that leverages the concepts of chunking and priming plus the added benefit of learning support systems within the more traditional learning model to provide greater opportunity for teachers and trainers to impact the quality of participant learning outcomes (Powers, 2002). CK is based on the notion that small units of information about complex concepts that are systematically delivered into the most appropriate learning environment within a meaningful support system provides the greatest opportunity for learners to acquire, retain, apply, and improve communication skills. Most applicable to the communication educator are Keys to Effective Listening and Keys to Effective Communication. However, all Key sets are based upon the aforementioned memory, retention, and recollection theories.

How the Keys to Effective and Competent Actions Work

Being considered competent in any interaction is largely based on one's communication behaviors. These behaviors are based on the skills one displays in any given interaction. Skills in general are based upon two fundamental components: 1) Information acquisition and retention about the cognitive processing function and 2) Information acquisition and retention about the behavioral options and conditions. Each of these components contains interrelated "chunks" that are identified as Keys to the Concept under question (i.e., message production, message reception, customer service, leadership). These Keys are collections of bits of information (both cognitive and behavioral) that, when taken together, are more significant and have a greater impact than when treated in isolation. While it is true that each "bit" consists of smaller units of information, the learning outcomes are not advantaged by such minute knowledge but rather by solid stores of related bits.

CK has developed 50 Keys to success in the areas of effective communication and effective listening. Each Key is a brief statement reflecting a specific collectivity of bits leading to enhanced skill in the desired area. The brevity of each Key allows learners the greatest opportunity for understanding, retention, and cross application at both the cognitive and behavioral levels. The CK system involves delivery of only one Key per day via an e-learning portal accessed most frequently accessed directly from the learner's preferred learning environment. Each Key is followed by four brief paragraphs, usually of no more than 2 or 3 sentences, the content of which reflects varying degrees and combinations of explanation and motivation. Explanation is often in the form of more specific description of one or more of the bits associated with the Key or contexts within which the Key may be identified more easily. Motivation consists of varying combinations of descriptions of negative outcomes from the non-

use of the Key and/or positive outcomes from the use of the Key. (See Appendix A for sample Keys.)

Some of the Keys are more representative of cognitions while others are more representative of behavioral options. Both are frequently interactive and essential to the ultimate improvement of an individual's skill. Without internalized knowledge of information processing options as well as behavioral options, learners will not have choices from which to draw if attempting to communicate more effectively when such an effort is dictated by the context and situation. Furthermore, some Keys are repetitive in nature and cross over potential applications. The connotative aspect of meaning via language and the distinctive differences between contexts allow both internal repetition and cross application of imagery (priming) across Keys.

Thus, the CK learning system contains a number of built-in learning factors designed to enhance the learning process: 1) Bits of Information, 2) Bite-sized Keys (Chunks), 3) Explanation, 4) Motivation, 5) Cognitive information, 6) Behavioral information, 7) Repetition, and 8) Multi-context imagery (priming). However, the complete CK learning system expands the potential for positive learner outcomes even further through the easy integration of the following aspects of learning support: 1) Information delivery in learner's application environment, 2) Participation in overt repetition of Keys over time, 3) Responses to Questions about the value of each Key, 4) Participation in weekly retention assessment activities, 5) Self-selection of weekly Most Important Key with stipulated application plan, 6) Participation in enjoyable connecting events, 7) Participation in Team-learning activities, 8) Complete clarity of exact expectations, and 9) Integration of learner self-selection of most important information over the complete set of 50 Keys in each area.

This method provides the necessary support for learning. Students meet on a regular basis in class and the teacher serves the function of Learning System Coordinator. There are many options available to the teacher, some more appropriate in one level of learning than another (e.g. College students relate to some learning activities differently than would Junior High School students). A complete Instructor Manual detailing multiple options is available for all teachers who request same at the CK website. (See Appendix B for a list of sample activities) The following case study will provide a foundational understanding of one application of the CK learning system.

CK Case Study—Teaching Environment

Students were informed of the Keys project as a supplemental part of the learning process in a class that would allow them to improve their skill in this area while the class focused upon larger traditional content issues in the *Business and Professional Communication* class. Keys were scheduled to avoid delivery on Spring Break. Student teams were formed and leaders selected. The leaders (referred to as the Class Advisory Group) met with the teacher over lunch to discuss the project and to select the most appropriate support activities. In this case, each student was expected to send an email to the teacher before noon on Mondays describing which of the preceding weeks 5 Keys was the Most Important Key (MIK) relative to the individual's view of self and projected future needs. Thus at the end of the term, each student would have self-selected 10 Keys as MIKs on a personal basis. Students were informed that they would be tested over the Keys at the conclusion of the project and the expectation was that they would retain each of the 50 Keys exactly and in the exact order in which they arrived. One point would be awarded for each MIK recalled correctly and ½ point for each remaining Key with ½ point deduction for each sequence error. The project was worth 30 points within the course grading

scale of 300 points. Two bonus points were awarded to all students who correctly remembered 49 or 50 of the Keys.

Furthermore, each team would have an opportunity to participate in a weekly contest designed to help the class remember each Key. Leaders determined the nature of the contest each week (i.e., skits, anagrams, poetry, song lyrics, anything goes, etc.). The rules were that the contest had to be fun, the focus had to be helping everyone to remember the team's assigned Key, each team would have no more than 1 minute of class time in the contest, the class would vote on which team did the best job (teams were not allowed to vote for themselves), and the members of the winning team identified by the leader as having participated meaningfully in the contest would all receive 1 bonus point toward determining their final grade. Finally, the Keys were discussed in class following each contest for a relatively brief period prior to discussing the regular class material.

Feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive (4.8 average on a 5.0 semantic differential using the descriptors of Not A Valuable Learning Experience and Definitely A Valuable Learning Experience). There were, however, two complaint areas in response to the question, "What did you find most negative about the CK learning project?" - 1) the need to remember all 50 Keys and 2) the simplicity of the Keys. Of the 79 students in the class, 62 remembered either 49 or 50 of the Keys, 10 remembered between 45 and 48, 5 remembered between 40 and 44 Keys, and 2 remembered 8 Keys.

Conclusion

The CK blended-learning system has great potential to enhance learner skill outcomes in that the system helps students/trainees build a code for effective communication and effective listening. As Gobet and Simon (1996b) suggest, this type of code building develops a rich

expertise in an area and the ability to recognize patterns among the information. Because the separate Concept Keys provide reinforcement and repetition of basic concepts, the student is able to build chunks of information related to effective behavior and is better able to access this information in memory. CK also incorporates the principle of priming in its structure. One way that CK uses priming is by delivering stimuli (Keys) that help students access their chunks. In addition CK uses case studies and in-class exercises to build an association between the keys and best practices communication behaviors. This type of training builds a system of associations that can be readily accessed or primed when the student faces a similar situation. Moreover, the recent technological evolution has opened a new door for teachers to impact the quality of education for their students. CK provides an exciting, innovative means of incorporating technology into instruction and skill development. While further validation is needed in terms of the longitudinal effects of such a system (i.e., can student's retain Keys over a long period of time), an outline of an innovative way to teach skills deemed necessary in everyday life has been provided.

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**Appendix A
Concept Keys**

**Appendix B
Classroom Activities**

Maximizing Employee Improvement

by

William Powers, Ph.D.
Texas Christian University

Graham Bodie
The Godwin Group

Margaret Fitch-Hauser, Ph.D.
Auburn University

Submitted to

The Training and Development Division
National Communication Association

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Maximizing Employee Improvement

A significant competitive factor for every organization is the continual improvement of soft-skills throughout the workforce. The company that has more skilled workers simply has greater productivity than their competition. As downsizing has become common, the absolute requirement to reduce costly misunderstandings with customers, vendors, and associates while obtaining higher levels of individual productivity is obvious. But, as everyone knows, improving employee skills, particularly soft-skills, has proven to be quite challenging, and in far too many instances has not been successful. The strategic planning philosophy based on the traditional educational model has been only slightly adjusted to the work environment and has not produced adequate results. Changes must be made.

The reality is that most employees do not express a positive orientation toward continual improvement of soft skills, nor do many maintain a positive orientation toward work itself. There are many reasons for the negative attitudes toward continual improvement, including discouraging reactions to pressures of standard education practices; the perceptions that the employee is not the problem and the employees and their “improvement” are not really valued by the organization; an escalating level of mistrust and antagonism between management and workers; and the generalized suspicion of being taken advantage of that exists within many workforce cultures. These produce a lackadaisical employee attitude toward personal improvement that minimizes the development opportunity. One may posit that contemporary organizational leaders are faced with a unique workforce composition containing three distinct groups formed on the basis of attitude toward work.

1. The first group (Maximizers) approximates 15% of the average workforce representing those ideal employees who look forward to professional improvement, are loyal team players, and demonstrate a continuing commitment to quality and productivity.
2. The second group (Maintainers) contains about 55% of the workforce representing employees who do their job, but only as instructed.
3. The third group (Minimizers) consists of the remaining 30% of the workforce who present continuing resistive challenges.

Given such a workforce composition, expectations for the breadth and depth of actual employee improvement under the current employee improvement development model must take into consideration all three groups. Given the combination of the negative attitude toward improvement and work plus the natural human resistance to changing behavior and thinking patterns, it is realistic to anticipate only partial improvement within each group. For example, we would suggest that an improvement program with 100-employees will have actually been an enormous success if it generated positive improvement in 35% of the participants (i.e. approximately 12 of the 15 Maximizers, 20 of the 55 Maintainers, and 3 of the 30 Resisters). Unfortunately, most workforce development efforts do not even come close to reaching an overall success rate of 35% of the workforce improving their soft skills. The Return On Investment of money and time in employee improvement programs with a success rate of merely 35% is simply unacceptable.

The good news is that there are several key factors that maximize improvement productivity in the shortest time with working adults from all three groups. First, when employees are presented with *digestible* amounts of high quality information, they understand, retain, and apply more than when *overloaded* with information. This represents a universal educational practice

called “chunking” that makes both good common sense and good business sense. Chunking is the foundation of effective human learning systems. The entire American educational system is actually based on this idea with college degrees being earned through student participation in about 40 classes (very large chunks). Each class consists of about 45 class sessions (medium sized chunks). Each class session contains about 10 new ideas (smaller chunks). The smaller the chunk of quality, fundamental information delivered at any given level, the greater the opportunity for understanding, retention, and application. To maximize learning productivity, organizational leaders must reexamine the size of the chunks of improvement within their programs relative to the complexity of the improvement area with consideration for the time and application opportunity restraints of working life.

Second, when the small chunks of information are systematically delivered over an extended time period to the employees in the most appropriate learning environment, understanding, retention, and application increases. If one is learning to operate a machine, the instruction pays off most when it occurs in the machine shop right next to the machine, not a seminar room. If one is learning workplace communication skills, the highest opportunity for significant application is when the learning occurs over time right in the actual work interaction environment, not a hotel room. To maximize learning productivity, leaders must reexamine the opportunity to create employee improvement engagement right in the job environment on a systematic, extended basis.

Third, when the employees become enthusiastically “engaged” in the learning process, understanding, retention, and application will increase. In the “old school” classic educational model, school leaders do not greatly concern themselves with overtly providing positive motivators for students to learn. It is simply assumed that students see the value and will engage

themselves. The use of negative motivators such as the grading system, the principal's office, and the parent conference are frequently assumed to provide sufficient incentive. Admittedly negative motivators do work—up to a point. Modern educational leaders do not eliminate these negatives but have provided more positive motivators than ever before, and we are seeing educational assessment demonstrate clear growth in the knowledge and skills of our future workforce.

Organizational leaders have frequently followed the classical model, asserting that employees are being paid to learn, that adults certainly understand the significance and relatedness of both positive and negative career consequences, and that the “hammer” is a great motivator. There is merit to that position, but it is only minimally successful with the adult workforce in the long term. To maximize learning productivity, organizational leaders simply must move forward in modernizing their approach to supporting employee improvement.

The list of reasons for employees not to become engaged in learning is extremely long. Organizational leaders must be creative in their effort to maximize learning productivity. The differences between “school” and “work” must be recognized and used to generate an internal cultural revolution. Appropriate use of workforce opinion leaders to plan, execute, and coordinate the improvement project eases management workload, while also increasing the potential for a successful improvement project. Maximizing employee improvement productivity is an organization-wide project that has long-term implications for organizational survival and success. The more reasonable negative reinforcement options (because they are valid) must be integrated with the very best of the positive reinforcement options (because they are valid). A “big-picture” vision by leadership is essential. For example, here are just a few frequently overlooked factors that impact the level of learning productivity in a challenging culture:

1. Sustained demonstration from the organization of the value associated with employee learning
2. Employee input on selection of workforce improvement soft-skills
3. Creation of soft-skills assessment procedures
4. Inclusion of soft-skills in job description
5. Inclusion of soft-skills in regularly scheduled job appraisals
6. Public inclusion of soft-skills appraisal in consideration of raises, promotions, recognitions, special assignments, and other points of evaluation and assignment of awards/rewards
7. Consistent display of organizational support for employee team leadership in decision-making and implementing an organization-wide employee improvement support project
8. Clear illustration of organizational support for meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences
9. Visible organizational focus on producing employee pride in the organization by combining support for employee value through continual learning with thematic emphasis on teamwork, loyalty, and commitment to quality within an enjoyable working environment.

When a modernization of learning principals is applied to the uniquely valuable aspects of an adult working environment, consistent employee improvement productivity will become the norm rather than the rarity. These are amazing levers that do not consume excessive money or time. The challenge of maximizing employee improvement will be successfully met.

APPENDIX

DIVERSIFIED APPROACH, INC.*An Overview Case Study of Concept Keys Program Implementation*

Diversified Approach, Inc. (DAI) is a fictional organization representative of several different approaches to implementing Concept Keys workforce development programs. DAI has 156 employees and diverse internal functions. Although managers have received some management training, little developmental work has been done with the employees. The general work atmosphere is “average.” Employees are neither antagonistic nor supportive toward management. Basic communication misunderstandings occur somewhat frequently. Managers sometimes talk about the “attitude problem.” As the company has grown in size, the feeling of “family” has decreased. Turnover rate has increased. Productivity is okay, but the general feeling is that it really could be much higher.

The CEO distributed a personal letter to each employee describing the motivation for improvement, the basics of the new project, and a request for employee input and involvement. Nominations for the (TLC) Project Team were solicited and the management group reached consensus on a Project Coordinator and Team members. The Project Team decided to use existing work groups as discussion groups. Two exceptions were made—a skeleton night crew of nine employees whose duties crossed departmental lines and a special cross-departmental crew of 13 employees working a three-day weekend shift. A complete base plan of operation with 5 theme-oriented activities was selected for the first 10-week period. Secretarial support and a budget allocation for support materials were received.

Following a successful Kick-Off Program, each discussion group identified a leader. The Project Coordinator briefed them on the Project regarding areas of freedom and desired outcomes from the project. Leaders were encouraged to establish regular group meetings to discuss improvement areas and progress reports, to determine group participation in company activities, and to develop local activities. To enhance participation and motivation, the discussion groups were given a fairly large area of freedom.

Each group was requested to determine the frequency, length, and place of meetings, agenda for meetings, and a group name. Due to the differences between the groups, each discussion group designed slightly different approaches and use of support materials. To say the least, the discussion groups became quite creative in developing a unique “signature” to their approach! Not every idea worked. As the project progressed, some groups met more or less frequently to meet their needs. One key development was the setting of “rules of politeness” for giving each other “Keys.” This seemed to have a special benefit for the supervisors. On an overall basis, the initial stage of the project was considered to be very successful. Employees got involved in their own personal improvement. Some groups even got involved in submitting creative ideas to the Project Team for the next stage of development.

After some initial reluctance, the management level discussion group began to open up with each other. In addition to discussing communication with their employees, they began to discuss improving communication with each other. Because managers were also members of their departmental groups, the creativity was allowed to bounce back and forth and improve efforts at

all levels. A feeling of “family” was beginning to return. Managers and employees were more considerate of each other and general working relations improved throughout the organization. Misunderstandings were handled on a more positive level. An upturn in the standard productivity indices was indicated.

People at all levels in the company began to realize that it was “okay” to talk about communication. Groups became involved in competition for the company-wide awards. The CEO publicly praised the results of the Team and Project. Employees saw a difference—and that made a difference. All employees looked forward to the next area of development.

