People get nervous when the organizational grapevine begins to buzz about potential acquisitions/takeovers, major process enhancements, facility closures, operational shifts and/or a reduction-in-force. Reactions can take on several forms -- from hushed water cooler conversation to sabotage or even violence.

To mitigate your team's concerns, you need to be a proactive communicator. But being proactive alone does not guarantee effectiveness.

Recognizing there is no such thing as the perfect sharing of meaning and understanding, it is up to you to determine the appropriate content of your message, as well as the best medium through which you should convey your thoughts to your many stakeholders.

First, to effectively communicate, you must solicit and understand the needs of your audience.

- You want your organization's top management to comprehend and fully support your efforts. Be crisp, polished and focused in your communications. You are telling and selling. You need their sponsorship and cheerleading. They can help you with budget, knock down silos, initiate broader systemic changes, and grant you access to information and people that might otherwise be off-limits. They need to see what you are doing from a high-level cost/benefit perspective. In addition to your periodic reports, invite senior management to your team meetings or for a walk around the shop floor. Show them what's changing and why.

- There is an art to "managing-up" with your boss. People who are best understand what their boss wants and deliver. In terms of communications, this generally means periodic updates (i.e., weekly) in the form of executive summaries for key activities -- what's working and what is not.

- Communicating with your peers is important, particularly since some portion of your initiatives will undoubtedly require cross-functional assistance. Give updates, keep people informed of the progress of key projects, and solicit feedback and suggestions to help instill a vested interest.

- Employees are the largest group with whom you will be communicating. In this regard, there are 5 "C's" to consider as the fundamental underpinning to all of your communications efforts. Keep your communications candid by always telling the truth, stay contextual by explaining to your team how the change agenda fits in the "big picture" of the organization, be constructive with your comments, working toward team unity, be consistent in all of your messages, and provide continuous communications reinforcing the change initiative.

- To the extent required, communicate with outside parties -- i.e., stockholders, distributors, suppliers, and customers, about the change agenda. Here, you want to sound confident about the undertaking, as well as appropriately reassuring about the progress being attained. Walk the fine line between treating these parties as true partners and protecting proprietary information and intellectual property. Seek help or input as needed.

Second, when choosing a communications medium, be sure that you "match" the proper conduit with the message you are trying to convey. For example, e-mail is not the forum to announce a facility closing or to prod people to work harder. Your message could be misinterpreted, interrupted, delayed, terminated, forwarded without your permission, or taken out of context.
Weigh how broad an audience you need to reach and how quickly. In this regard, you likely have several communication channels available in most organizational settings.

Third, repetition counts. For any single communications event or salient message, the tried and true adage applies of “telling them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them.” This mindset keeps you on topic, and increases the probability that your message is hitting home with your audience.

Lastly, keep your communications simple -- tailored to the needs and interests of your audience. This does not mean “dumbing down” your message; rather, you need to understand what your audience needs to hear.