In the Loop

The Value of Employee Communication in Today's Workplace

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During times of economic and business change, employee communication becomes particularly critical. If you're not keeping staff informed about company developments, rumors can spread, and morale and productivity can decline. A recent survey by OfficeTeam found that managers feel they are on the right track—with 69 percent of those polled noting that messages to employees have become more frequent within the past year and 56 percent suggesting communication is of higher quality.

The survey findings sound promising—until you consider the employees' perspective. Only 37 percent of workers surveyed agree that there has been a boost in the rate of corporate updates and only 38 percent believe communication efforts have been enhanced. Clearly, managers have room for improvement

when it comes to employee communication. Here are some key steps to ensuring your staff outreach is effective.

Know what to share

While you may not be able to disclose all of the details about business decisions or activities, you should keep your team in the loop. For instance, if your company is opening a new office nearby, explain the reasoning for the expansion and what it might mean for current employees. Will your location remain open, or will staff have to work from the new facility? Even situations that are positive may not seem that way to staff if they lack key information.

Sometimes managers mistakenly believe they should not share bad news or that employees won't understand the big-picture implications of a certain change. However, it is better to be open and honest, when possible, than to let people hear news through the grapevine. That way, you have greater control over how the information is received and perceived, and you can ensure particulars are accurate. In addition, staff members who are given full details about business challenges can play a more active role in helping to overcome them.

Also recognize that there is such a thing as over-communicating. If you provide too many of the finer details, people may feel overwhelmed and overlook critical messages. When in doubt, ask yourself what facts are most pertinent to your employees and their daily job requirements. If staff members need to be aware of a large amount of information, consider prioritizing the specifics and conveying the messages over time.

Select the right delivery method

The adage "it's not what you say but how you say it" holds merit when it comes to employee communication. Carefully consider how you want to present news and how frequently updates should be given.

E-mail may be a popular communication method but be cautious about relying on it exclusively. Though useful, e-mail isn't ideal in all situations. For example, if you are addressing a topic that greatly affects an individual's job or need to discuss sensitive or complex information, it is usually best to do so in person. This will give you the opportunity to clarify key points and allow those you are communicating with to ask questions or voice concerns. You can then follow up with an e-mail or memo reiterating critical messages.

Staff meetings are another effective way to share news with employees. But be aware of the limitations of these gatherings. For instance, while some people readily participate in group discussions, others may not, preferring to share their questions, ideas and concerns privately. You may need to supplement a large meeting with opportunities for team members to discuss the topic with you individually or in smaller groups. Also, make sure that you're holding formal discussions out of necessity, not out of routine. A long-held meeting often becomes such a habit that no one stops to ask whether there is still a compelling reason to hold the session. There should be an obvious need to gather so time is productive.

Choose your words wisely

As you share critical information, think carefully about how you phrase key details. Even well-meaning efforts to exchange news can be ineffective if the audience can't comprehend the message or recognize how it affects them. Avoid using buzzwords. For instance, stating that the company "will reorganize to further a synergistic strategy after we're acquired" is likely to leave employees scratching their heads, confused about what you meant. They may wonder what exactly the change means to the organization, including whether their jobs will be affected. Make sure the language you use is concise and crystal-clear.

If you don't have all of the necessary insights to address a sensitive or difficult topic, say so. For instance, you might say, "At this time, I don't have any information to share. I know

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OfficeTeam survey of 150 senior executives and 493 office workers

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this matter is important to you and I hope to be able to provide you with an update soon." This is much better than providing a multitude of "maybe" responses to theories about what might happen. People want the reassurance that you are staying on top of the facts and will relay accurate details as soon as possible.

Effective communication also means encouraging a two-way exchange of information. Don't promote an open-door policy without following through with it.

Don't forget body language

Take the time to thoroughly assess your mannerisms and behavior as you communicate with employees. Could any of your actions be misinterpreted? For instance, if you cross your arms, people may think you are angry, or if you tap your pencil while they're talking, this may come across as if you are bored. Speak in an even tone, make eye contact and have good posture to convey the right image.

Make sure your writing shines

Give as much attention to written communication as you do to preparing for a vital discussion with employees. Before you begin writing, determine your objective. Do you want to inform? Create a call to action? State the topic you're addressing upfront and why it's important to your staff. Short, straightforward sentences often work best so employees can immediately access the information that is most relevant to them.

Proofread all documents—including routine e-mails—before sending them out. Errors in spelling, punctuation or usage can affect your credibility and distract employees from the message.

Be accessible

Effective communication also means encouraging a two-way exchange of information. Don't promote an open-door policy without following through with it. You may need to close your office door periodically to focus on projects or address confidential matters, but make sure there are stretches of time when it's open and you're available. If you will be inaccessible for a while, let employees know the anticipated time frame and when they can reach you.

Employees want to be able to communicate directly with their supervisors. Try to return staff voice mails and e-mails personally and promptly. When you meet with employees individually, hold calls and stay engaged in the discussion. These may sound like small—and to a certain extent obvious—steps but managers often overlook these types of subtle actions, especially when stressed or busy. Through your efforts, you'll show that you are sincere in wanting to interact with your team.

Take the initiative

Additionally, be proactive and develop strong working relationships with your team. Get out of your office when you can and talk to your employees. Show a genuine interest in their work and personal activities so they will feel more comfortable approaching you with questions and concerns. Impromptu discussions in the hallway or break room can often be as useful as formal meetings in gathering input from staff and showing that you value their knowledge.

When a large project is coming up, encourage employee ideas by scheduling brainstorming sessions. Select a neutral setting such as a conference room. While your office might

seem like a comfortable place for small meetings, some staff members may find it intimidating. Try to include a diverse base of employees in brainstorming sessions to generate a wide range of ideas and opinions. For example, you may even include individuals who are not directly involved in the project to get an outside perspective.

Be consistent

Your words and actions must be consistent if people are to take you seriously. For instance, if you ask employees for their cost-savings suggestions but don't follow through on any of the ideas, team members may believe their opinions were never really heard or valued. You may not be able to implement every recommendation made by your staff, but give the feedback serious consideration and let individuals know the status of their proposals.

Consistency is also critical when it comes to communicating about job performance. Someone who is late for work too many times over the course of a month shouldn't be reprimanded while a top performer who does the same thing is given leeway. Make all employees aware of your expectations and use a fair and predictable system for keeping everyone on track.

Minimize gossip

In uncertain times, the workplace rumor mill runs at full speed. People may feel unsettled and insecure, even if your company is doing fine. Stay in tune with office gossip and address any misinformation promptly.

Also, make sure that you're not contributing to the problem. If you develop a reputation for providing inaccurate or incomplete information, employees are less likely to trust what you share. When in doubt, err on the side of caution because employees are likely to remember promises you made—and be disappointed if you don't follow through. So, don't assure staff members that there will be raises this year if there is even a slight chance that pay increases will not come through as expected. You may bolster morale in the short term but irreparably harm your credibility if you give false hope.

Get the information you need

What can you do if you want to promote more open communication with your employees but aren't receiving the necessary details from your own supervisor? Don't expect your manager to suddenly change; you'll need to take the initiative to remedy the situation. For instance, if your company is about to implement a new software application but you have been given no information about how it affects your department, ask for the details. You might try something like, "I would like to send a memo to my employees about the new software rollout but don't have the specifics about the plans. I have a few questions." Then, point out the exact facts you seek. If you are too vague in your request, you may never get the information you need.

If problems with your manager are ongoing, you might propose regular meetings as a way to keep updated. You can explain that this will allow your boss to stay on top of critical events in your department while you can

learn more about and better support your supervisor's priorities.

Frequent and effective communication can help employees feel more connected to your company and its goals. This can be a real asset as the economy improves and retention becomes a greater concern. People who believe their employers treat them with respect by keeping them informed and listening to their ideas and concerns are less likely to leave for other opportunities. By refining your communication strategies, you can ensure you're on the right track and building a positive, supportive work environment. **FMJ**

Robert Hosking is executive director of OfficeTeam, a leading staffing service specializing in the temporary placement of highly skilled administrative and office support professionals. OfficeTeam has more than 325 locations worldwide and offers online job search services at www.officeteam.com.

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