Stop kidding yourself and join the conversations that will fuel your business success

By Angela D. Sinickas

Effective communication with employees leads to greater productivity, lower turnover, improved customer satisfaction, higher revenue and reduced costs. Don't believe it? Take a look at three studies that proved internal communication has a measurable return on investment:

- By performing a regression analysis on employee attitude survey data, Hewlett Packard and GE found a strong statistical correlation between various aspects of two-way employee/supervisor communication and two bottom-line goals, productivity and employee retention.

- As reported in a *Harvard Business Review* article in 1998, Sears found that when they raise employee attitude survey scores by 5%, customer satisfaction improves by 1.3%, which improves growth in revenue by 0.5%. Many of the key employee attitude survey items they measured related to employee information and communication.

- A five-year study by Dr. Daniel Denison at the University of Michigan found that companies with higher scores on information-sharing questions on a standardized attitude survey had higher return on investment and return on sales than companies with low scores. The companies with better information-sharing practices also ranked higher in their own industries than the companies with low information-sharing scores.

So why do so many managers decide they're either not ready, not willing or too busy to communicate with their employees? They're only kidding themselves. Management doesn't really have a choice of whether to communicate or not, just if they will contribute their views to the conversations that will be going on around them anyway through the grapevine. Moreover, silence from management speaks volumes all by itself.

Here are some easy tips to improve communication with your employees that are guaranteed to provide a great return on a minimal investment of time.

Establish open channels of communication

At minimum, this means having a regular forum for two-way discussions with employees. Depending on the nature of what your people do, this could be a daily, weekly or monthly meeting. One key requirement is that the meetings be conducted on a regular basis and not cancelled due to heavy workloads. That's the very time where a quick

meeting with everyone could be most valuable for finding ways to simplify a project or share the workload more effectively.

The second key element of effective meetings is to allow enough time for four types of interaction:
- Managers talking about things they need to tell employees, including follow-up on questions from previous meetings.
- Employees asking questions to understand that information and what is expected of them because of it.
- Employees talking about the status of their own projects, not only to keep you informed, but also to help coordinate their own efforts for maximum efficiency.
- Employees raising concerns that only the manager can address, resolve or push upward to higher levels of management.

One transportation company discovered the high cost of not conducting regular meetings after a survey identified that 24% of employees had no access to safety meetings, which were required by policy to be conducted monthly. A closer look at the data showed that those 24% were located mostly in certain terminals, where nearly 100% of employees said they had no access. Not surprisingly, those same terminals had the greatest costs per employee due to high accident rates. Terminal managers may not have wanted to reduce productivity to schedule a meeting, but they paid for that time with higher accident rates.

Translate corporate messages for your group

For the issues that don't directly affect your staff, just be sure they've heard about the information and answer any questions you can. For the corporate plans and policy changes that directly affect your people, you'll want to present this information to your staff in a way that they understand. Try to cover not only how it affects them, but also what you want them to DO about the information.

Translating corporate messages for local relevance seems to be one of the hardest things for many managers to do. To make this process easier, answer the following questions for yourself first:
- Who in my group is affected by this?
- How will it affect us?
- What processes that we're involved in will need to change?
- What specifically will my people need to do more of, less of or just differently in order for this corporate change to work?
- What do my people already know about this?
- What will they need to know in order to make the changes required?
- What attitudes or opinions do they have on this topic that will either encourage the behavior change or obstruct it?
- What will it take to change a non-productive attitude?
- How should I present this information in a way that will be most acceptable to my employees and will make it clear what I'd like them to do?

For any desired change in behavior or attitudes, information should be covered in a meeting because of the complexity of the topic and the likelihood that employees will have a lot of questions before they understand what is expected of them. If the

information is just a simple piece of new knowledge, written information or voicemail may be enough. Just be sure that your entire audience has regular access to your selected information channel.

Facilitate shift-change communication

Organizations like Shell Exploration and Production Company and Osram Sylvania have saved millions of dollars by systematizing information flow during shift changes. They have avoided redoing work that has already been completed. They have reduced accidents and downtime due to malfunctioning equipment. They have avoided doing work that wasn't even needed anymore due to changes in a customer's needs.

In telephone call centers, shift-change communications prepared customer service representatives with the answers to questions or issues that arose on the previous shift so they could all respond appropriately on the first call. Otherwise the customer service reps each would have needed to find answers on their own and then return calls to the customers with questions.

One way to facilitate shift-change information sharing is to keep a log of the key occurrences on each shift. Then a supervisor and one or more people from the initial shift stay over about 10 minutes of overtime to brief the incoming shift on changes like:
- Equipment that has been malfunctioning or behaving in any unexpected ways.
- Repair or maintenance work that has been completed or will be needed soon.
- Status of customer orders: any changes in the order itself, where supplies or finished goods are being kept, low supplies that need to be replenished, etc.
- Answers to questions that came up from customers, other departments or other employees during the last shift.

Many companies make the complete shift logs available to all employees in the work group to refer to during the shift. Some keep logs attached to each piece of equipment. Others keep a notebook in the work area or put the information online on a computer available to all employees. Some have effectively used a whiteboard to chart key information needed by people on the same shift as well as the next shift.

Listen to your employees

Employees often start feeling pain from changes in your marketplace or workplace before management becomes aware of them. While it's true that some employees are just whiners, most of them are complaining about real issues that are beyond their control that may have an impact on productivity, safety, quality, etc.—all issues for which you may be accountable. Listening to their issues, and asking for employees' recommendations to fix the issues, is one of the easiest ways to make sure you hit your goals.

Active listening includes spending time walking around talking to your staff while they are working. This isn't to check up on them, but to understand what they're doing and what challenges they're facing that makes it hard for them to do what you're expecting of them. You may find out that employees are missing key tools, or a change made in another department is making their jobs harder to do right, or equipment is malfunctioning so frequently that it needs to be replaced. If you're often available to them

this way, they will become more likely to open up to you. In addition, you'll hear about issues you can address before they blow up into full-fledged crises.

Test ideas before you announce implementation steps

As knowledgeable about the big picture as managers might be, they are rarely still in touch with the day-to-day realities of the jobs their employees are doing. The best-laid plans will fail if they don't take into account how the people who need to implement them will actually be able to do it.

Part of the issue is buy-in. If employees don't believe in the need to do something and the specific way it is to be done, they will either ignore management's new plans or sabotage them.

Even in the best of cases, where employees are willing and able to implement changes, the new initiative may be doomed to failure because the implementation plans are intrinsically flawed. One company had a strike a few years ago that included administrative employees who interacted with customers. Management temporarily replaced the striking employees with the computer programmers who had recently developed a new software tool used by those employees. When the programmers had to use their own program, they understood for the first time how it didn't fit the needs of customers or the employees who were supposed to use it.

Establish horizontal communications

Key business processes often travel through several departments. When the processes start taking too long to complete or costing too much money, the problems can usually be traced to a lack of communication among the departments.

This happens naturally because each department reports upward through a chain of command. The leader of each department makes decisions and changes for the good of his or her own department. Leaders rarely know what impact their changes will have on how those processes will work before and after reaching their own departments.

Managers who may be good at communicating with their staffs and with their own leadership don't always realize the importance of effective horizontal communication between themselves and managers in other departments—until multi-department crises arise. And your employees can provide you with an early warning system of disaster about to happen because they may be the first to feel impact of the change.

By following the active listening steps described earlier, you'll be alerted to some of these emerging obstacles early on. Then you can meet with some of your peers in other departments, perhaps along with a few employees from each of your departments, to map out the changes in each department that would smooth out the process overall for the company. When you come up with a plan, you can all implement the changes under your own control. For those solutions that require policy changes, you can present the current situation and ideal solution jointly to the leaders of your departments, showing the financial impact of making the change or leaving things as they are.

The rewards of communication

Using communication as a business tool will help meet your operational targets faster and with fewer bumps in the road. It will also reduce the amount of time you will need to spend on productivity, recruitment and training issues, as illustrated in the studies at the beginning of this article.

But perhaps the most gratifying outcome will be that as you listen more to your employees and work more closely with other departments, you'll become more knowledgeable about your company and the forces affecting it. Leveraging that knowledge can put your career on the fast track.

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