



Tough Times Requires Greater Employee Communication

By: Larry Turner

Even the best leaders hear their employees complain about the lack of communication in a company. I have heard this complaint even in companies where I had some communication effort reaching out to the work force on a weekly basis. This is an indication that the employees need regular communication to help them feel engaged in the company and move the company forward.

The employees will fill any void of information with their own assessment of the situation, and in most cases this information does not operate in reality. This informal communication channel then provides the wrong message for a broader employee base, which in many cases demotivates and disrupts the direction of the business.

A lack of internal communication is a problem in good times, and is detrimental in difficult financial times. Instead of focusing on the daily work at hand, employees get caught up in the rumor mill resulting in an atmosphere of fear and concern. The end result is a loss of productivity and more importantly a reduced level of customer service by those employees responsible for dealing directly with your client base.

The senior leadership of a company can prevent this from happening by implementing a proactive communication program. The tactics may be uncomfortable for those senior leaders that spend most of their day sitting behind a desk, because it requires them to get out of the office and spend time with their teams. A few tactics that I have used successfully with teams as large as 1,600 people include:

1.) All Employee Meetings -- I have found that a monthly meeting of all employees provides an opportunity to cover information ranging from progress on initiatives to financial results from the previous month. Even in privately held companies, where there is a need to keep financial results confidential, I have shared how the company had done compared to key financial targets. For example, "last month revenue was better than planned, but profit was short due to unexpected expenses related to..." This provides even the front-line employees with a feel on how the company is performing, and it also gives the senior leaders an opportunity to explain how the different departments contribute to the financial results of the company. I have never had an employee tell me they would rather not know how the company is performing.

2.) Employee Emails -- Take advantage of email to communicate with all the employees that have access to provide updates through the month. The information may be a new sale that just closed, progress on hiring a key position, customer feedback, or the company being highlighted in the press. Communicate the good and bad! Your employees will hear and see the bad, so take a proactive approach and communicate it up front with an explanation they can understand. Emails should be relatively short, and anything that takes more than a 4 sentence paragraph probably deserves an additional all company meeting to explain.



3.) Bulletin Board Posts -- Bulletin board posts allow all employees to share in the information outlined in the employee emails. Post everything that goes out in email as well as any company related articles in the press that did not get communicated in an email.

4.) Walking Around -- I cannot emphasize enough the need to get out of your office and "walk" around the company. It may be walking through the assembly or manufacturing area, spending time in engineering, calling a customer, or making a sales call with your sales and marketing teams. This gives you first hand knowledge on what is happening in your company and allows you to talk to those employees closest to the process and closest to the customer. One of my favorite activities is dropping in to observe a meeting that is taking place (My management team in one business referred to this practice as a "drive by" -- if I was walking by a meeting and it looked interesting I would stop in to observe), which allowed me to hear the issues and observe how my teams were handling with topic.

Increasing communication with your employees will yield a more engaged and effective work place. This could be in the number of widgets produced, but more importantly improved customer interactions and workplace team dynamics. Improving the level of communication with your employees will position you to emerge from these tough economic times a stronger company. Hopefully the economy improves sooner, rather than later.

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