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Communication is Key

Clear and timely communication is crucial in keeping employees engaged in a successful organization. An employer who listens when we speak and trusts us with information makes us feel valued and appreciated. But what does it mean to foster an atmosphere of communication within the organization? What needs to change to promote that communication within an organization?

- ✓ **Communication should be clear, positive and constructive.** Management should encourage this and the example must start at the top. All management communications must meet high standards with the expectation and encouragement of feedback from the team. Communication is, after all, a two-way street. This sort of a change to the communication culture will take consistency and time.
- ✓ **Connect with your staff frequently.** The time it takes will more than pay for itself. Upper management is often kept in the loop about day-to-day affairs in daily or weekly meetings, but they are in the minority of employees who know what's happening. Consider making notes or minutes of the daily or weekly manager meetings and distributing them throughout the organization. If most of what you are covering is boilerplate topics there is no harm in sharing them with the rest of the staff. If sensitive topics are being discussed, each team should determine what information to share and with whom. Use a critical eye and your best judgment. But consider sharing more of the closed-door meeting topics to keep your staff in the loop. Honesty and openness go a long way in fostering loyalty and engagement.
- ✓ **A weekly or monthly note from your senior leaders to the organization about the path forward and the path behind will establish good communications.** This does not have to be a dissertation. A simple email highlighting the business of the week or month acknowledging wins, and drawing attention to problems and potential solutions is perfect. People will spot a lack of authenticity quickly so avoid templates, forms, and newsletters. Stilted, formulaic, repetitive business-speak turns people off. Be clear, be concise and be honest – employees sense right away when management is just going through the motions.
- ✓ **Email, while a necessary part of today's business culture, is not the best method for all communication.** The power of face-to-face discussion cannot be overestimated. Use video conferencing technology to conduct meetings, chats, or brainstorming sessions while looking at the people you are speaking with. Use social networks to connect your staff and make it easier to voice opinions. An Intranet or a dedicated enterprise-wide social network keeps things business-oriented and safe for the organization while opening lines of communication across the staff.
- ✓ Town-hall-style meetings or CEO **"open office"** time are both solutions to broaden communication in an organization. An open forum to ask questions of management, raise concerns, and discuss new projects will help foster an environment of quality communication. Some organizations have adopted **"open door"** days or hours for senior and middle managers allowing their staff to stop in and discuss topics of concern with their highest level peer. This allows staff open communication with management and generates a culture of open discussion and accessibility. The perspective gained from these meetings and one-on-one sessions is invaluable.



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- ✓ **Suggestion boxes and engagement surveys** are a simple yet effective way to ask for feedback with the benefit of anonymity. We all like to think our organization is doing the best it can, but there are always improvements that can be made. That is normal and expected, but not every employee will feel comfortable giving constructive feedback to their employer. The suggestion box allows open, free-form feedback that gives you the most honest feedback possible. Engagement surveys, while also anonymous, are more structured. They help you get answers for specific questions, allowing your managers to understand the scope and scale of the issue at hand.
- ✓ **A public-facing communication channel, a social media presence, YouTube channel, or blog** that discusses the organization's current events is a great method of communication in the modern work environment. Transparency and accessibility of the information demonstrates that your organization understands the value of communication. Having a public communication channel also helps to build employee pride of association with your organization.

This is, of course, a culture: the very idea of communication, open and honest feedback, and willingness to change. These were foreign concepts to most organizations for a very long time. The standard was always to just come to work, do your job and go home. Management would make decisions and the employees would carry out the day-to-day work. Senior management rarely sought the thoughts of the general staff. The inner workings of the organization were kept behind closed doors. So why change, why go through this process and put the work in if it's always been easier to maintain the status quo?

Changing the way an organization communicates and builds engagement is something that can't wait. A study from the John M. Olin School of Business at Washington University estimates that 40 percent of the companies on today's S&P 500 will no longer exist in 10 years. While top tier of organizations once endured for the better part of a century, those unwilling to adapt to the changing workforce and the need for engagement now have perhaps a decade at best.

If communication is a key to success, change and its acceptance is a lock. All these suggestions and all the ideas that float on the internet about improving communication and engagement mean nothing if your organization is unwilling to listen to feedback and accept change. If the suggestion box is just a trash bin that you never look at, or survey results are ignored, they are more damaging to employee feedback than having done nothing at all. An organization truly interested in communication accepts feedback, understands criticism and is excited to hear new ideas and thoughts from its staff. Consider each and every communication with your staff to be an open invitation for feedback. Encourage the idea that something as simple as an email to tell people about the new parking spaces to something as complicated as a company merger are all within the acceptable realm of discussion. You'll find that you get back what you put in. When employees see honesty and transparency from the top down, they're more likely to model that behavior with their peers and supervisors, which makes everyone's job that much easier.