

Strategize communications to better connect with employees

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As goal-setting and other planning activities are initiated for 2009, it is anticipated that fiscal soundness is an item that is either at or near the top of the list for most, if not all, organizations. This priority becomes even more critical as employers face uncertain economic times. While attention to the numbers is a necessity, there is also a need to expand the organization's focus to ensure that other key elements are in place to support those financial objectives.

One critical element that should not be overlooked is the role that communications plays in the organization's ability to connect with employees. The effectiveness of organizational communications impacts employee engagement, morale and turnover. Therefore, management's ability to make this connection will influence employee and customer relations as well as the bottom line.

The following are tips to apply in developing a communications strategy that will strengthen the organization's connection with its employees:

1. Begin planning for the current year by reflecting on what went well, what could have been improved upon, and what opportunities were missed in communicating with employees during the previous year.
2. Review the mission statement, handbook and other employee communications. Ensure not only that the content is up-to-date but also that the tone and wording communicate the message that management intends to convey.
3. Tailor communications to address the specific needs of the organization. Consider the culture, size, number of locations, makeup of the work force and other relevant factors.
4. Be deliberate and intentional in developing organizational communications. Just as with other activities, preparation is a prerequisite for success.

5. Avoid the potential negative impact that occurs when employees receive insufficient information about what is taking place within the organization. If communications from management are lacking, employees will make assumptions and rely on the rumor mill.
6. Communicate pertinent information in a timely manner. If employees first learn of significant organizational matters through external sources, confidence in management may suffer. Recognize that circumstances, such as legal matters, may dictate the need to wait for the release of specific information. In these cases, downsides should be identified initially and taken into account when preparing forthcoming communications.
7. Examine communications to ensure that they are inclusive and reflect the diversity of the employee population. These objectives should be kept in mind when deciding on pictures and content for employee newsletters, videos and other communications.
8. Select varied communication channels when disseminating information to employees and/or eliciting their input. Examples include discussion forums, newsletters, suggestion systems, employee opinion surveys, e-mail, videoconferences, problem-solving committees and focus groups.
9. Apply caution if there is a tendency to become overly dependent on e-mail as a means of communicating. Whereas e-mail is speedy and readily available, face-to-face communications may be more appropriate and effective based on the nature of the situation.
10. Seek employee input to increase organizational effectiveness and gauge the workplace climate. For example, employees can be resourceful in saving costs and sharing ideas for improvement. When seeking input, be aware that the goodwill gained from this attentiveness will, in all likelihood, be eroded if employees do not receive timely responses to their questions and suggestions.
11. Use wording that is consistent with organizational practices to communicate management's intent. Although it is often desirable to select words that create a positive focus (e.g. transparency, empowerment, partnership), this terminology should be in keeping with the culture. Care should be given to the words chosen to ensure that they accurately describe management's customary actions. Failure to live up to communicated intentions can produce unanticipated negative consequences, including a lack of trust.
12. Review written communications to ensure that they will be understood by employees. Consider the level of understanding required before using abbreviations, acronyms or industry jargon without accompanying explanations. Also, take into

consideration other factors, such as educational level and any potential language barriers.

13. Recognize that the CEO, executive staff and other members of management are role models for the organization. Their credibility with employees is dependent on whether their verbal and written messages are consistent with their day-to-day actions. Credibility and trust will be reinforced by “walking the talk” and rapidly lost if the talk is not in keeping with actions.

14. Identify opportunities for senior executives to increase their visibility with employees as well as their awareness of what is taking place in the work environment. One means of accomplishing these objectives is to interface with employees in their work settings. An emphasis should be placed on having these types of interactions occur on a regular basis.

15. Create an expectation that supervision throughout the organization will have ongoing two-way communications with employees who directly report to them, both individually and in groups. These communications should take place for a number of purposes that include day-to-day planning, providing feedback regarding job performance and sharing organizational information.

16. Look for opportunities to praise employees publicly. Make expressions of public appreciation a habit, understanding the importance that employees place on recognition of this nature.

17. Ensure that all communications demonstrate respect. Regardless of the situation, management is responsible for defining the image that the organization wants to portray.

BARBARA RICHMAN, SPHR, is a senior consultant with HR Mpact, a Memphis human resource consulting firm. She can be reached at (901) 685-9084, (901) 496-0462 or barbara@hr-mpact.com.