Are you listening? 4 ways to strengthen upward communication!

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October 23, 2019

Most organizations understand the importance of good internal communications and senior leaders will tout theirexcellent programs for communicating with their staff. When pressed for specifics, they will list the ways in which *they* share information with the *employees.* When asked how the *employees* share information with *upper management,* the list is much smaller.

Much of the internal communication programs in an organization are centered around communicating TO the staff.

Talking or listening

If you were asked to identify all of the formal communication processes in your organization your list might look something like this:

- Regular department meetings
- Periodic "town hall" meetings
- Employee newsletter
- Suggestion program
- Open door policy
- Monthly management meetings
- Blast email/text messages

Go through your list and put either an up or down arrow to indicate whether the communication is top-down, bottom-up or both. Do your communication processes allow for bottom-up communication or are they focused on top-down communication?

We know that it is important that information flows up from the front line. In fact, in a high performance organization, the front line should be the focus of attention. It is at that front line interaction that all revenue is generated, the quality of

service is defined, and customer satisfaction is achieved.

Does your organization have well defined programs to encourage input from the front line? Has upward communication been structured into your management processes?

More simply put, is listening part of your cultural DNA? Here are some strategies that can make your upward communication more successful:

1. Provide communication options to accommodate different personalities.

To often, organizations dictate limited ways in which employees can share concerns, problems or ideas with upper management. "We have an open door policy" or "talk to your supervisor" can be standard responses. This may work for some employees, but others may not be comfortable in face-to-face meetings.

Rather than making a judgment, provide alternative communication strategies to accommodate the personality differences of your staff. For example, many publicly-traded companies use an outside firm with an 800 number for employees to anonymously report concerns. The primary focus may be the SEC but employees often report EEOC or other employment issues which are forwarded to HR for resolution. The cost is nominal and there is nothing preventing any organization from using the same resource to encourage employee feedback for those who want to remain anonymous.

Do you have a suggestion program with suggestion boxes located throughout the facility? Expand the program to a "Speak-Up" program. Allow employees to use the forms to have any issue or concern addressed. The forms could go to an internal third party (ours was the Communications Dept.). and the employee could indicate whether s/he wanted to remain anonymous. This third party could forward the concern to the appropriate department and respond to the employee.

If employees want everything documented, provide a well defined Problem Resolution Procedure with defined time frames.

The point is to not limit how an employee must communicate with you. You will

get more and better feedback if you provide communication methods for varying personalities and preferences.

2. Don't passively wait for employee input-ask for it!

It is easy for organizations to rely on passive programs for upward communication, In other words, the program is there but is dependent upon the employee choosing to use it. What programs do you have that solicit employee feedback?

One hospital had a program of *Management Rounds*. This program required a pair of managers to visit all areas of the hospital on all shifts monthly. Two managers would generally take some sort of treat (Valentine cookies, popcorn, ice-cream) and walk through all departments.

While one manager may have been distributing the goodies, the other was soliciting staff input: How is it going? What issues are you facing? Any , staffing, etc? Is there anyone that should be recognized?

It was amazing how much information could be obtained by simply asking. Employees would volunteer not only problems that needed resolution but kudos that needed to go to other departments or specific employees.

During one HR benefit fair, employees were asked to anonymously complete a card with two sentences on it: "*If I were in charge, the first thing I would fix is….*" and "*The best thing about my current job is …..*". Yes, more info could be obtained on the Employee Engagement Survey but this informal exercise provided a lot of useful information.

Employee meetings should always solicit questions and feedback. If an answer can't be shared, tell that to the employees.

3. Formalize the listening.

What is meant by that? Don't leave the upward communication up to the skill of the manager. As one leader tells me, "Take a systems approach to listening".

In the rounding program, even though goodies were being passed out, the managers were using a form to obtain information. The form directed the managers to obtain the following information in each department:

- What was going well
- What problems or roadblocks the employee was facing
- Any questions employee had of management
- Any suggestions
- Recognition of other employees/departments that should occur

Simple information, but a"systems approach" insured that useful and consistent information was obtained regardless of the managers doing the interviews.

Do you have a suggestion or speak up program? Is it used by employees or are the collection boxes dusty and rarely checked? If there is no follow up , employees see that hearing their input is really not a priority. Check the boxes DAILY even if 90% of the time the boxes are empty. They are empty most of the time because the staff know they are not being checked or there is no response.

Maybe you take pride in the fact that management holds periodic "town hall" meetings with the employees and that these are opened up to questions and input from staff. When staff raise questions or suggestions how often is the response" We'll get back to you on that", or "great idea, we'll follow up". Then, nothing happens.

Again, formalize the process so that someone is recording every employee concern or suggestion.

Of course, formalizing the listening so that useful and consistent information is obtained is nothing without the final and most important step:

4. Respond, respond, in a timely manner!

No response and the employees know that listening to their input is not a priority. You have set up programs for employee suggestions and input because some management guru said you should or the programs act as a safety pressure valves to prevent a big blowup!

A systematic listening program builds in timely responses. We can look at the

examples that we have been using to see how this is done.

In the management rounding program, those doing the rounding were required to collate the responses the morning after completing the rounding on all shifts. These were made available to all managers and employee input that required a response was assigned to the appropriate manager. Within 24 hours, the assigned manager had to document that s/he had followed up with the employee.

A similar approach was taken with the suggestion/speak-up program. Boxes were checked daily, and concerns were forwarded to an appropriate manager for response. Within 24 hours, the manager was to initiate contact and document it with HR.

Comments, suggestions or concerns raised in employee "town hall" meetings were handled in a similar manner. The comments were recorded during the meeting. At the close of each meeting, a senior leader or manager was assigned follow up responsibility. Again, with 24 hours follow up was to occur. The responses were tracked and documented by an administrative assistant until completed.

In summary, don't leave it up to the employee to initiate communication with you. Develop active programs to seek out input. Respond when it occurs. If you demonstrate that the employee's input really is important then you will be amazed at how it can improve your organization!