

Pave the way for change by improving the flow of information between leaders, managers and staff

KEEPING LINES OF COMMUNICATION CLEAR

Managers play an important role in translating the vision of leaders into the actions of employees. But to facilitate this, organizations need some basic communication processes in place. Here, James Harkness provides some practical tips on how to improve communication between leaders, managers and staff, paving the way for quicker change.

According to Larkin & Larkin¹, there's an 80 percent failure rate in the way companies communicate about change. However, they also found that communicating early with frontline managers and employees brings a 20 percent lift in employee performance, suggesting that uncertainty, rather than bad news, lowers employee performance.

As these statistics show, there's much to be gained from improving communication from leaders down to managers down to employees. But what's often lacking are internal processes to support this.

Some companies, however, are getting it right. To illustrate the point, here are some smart practice tips and practical examples of how to clear lines of communication between leaders, managers and staff.

1. Have short, sharp meetings:

At UK retailer Marks & Spencer, "huddles" are used to communicate with employees who are difficult to reach in traditional ways, such as people working on shifts and part-time workers.

Supervisors bring their teams together for huddles every day – a maximum ten-minute briefing in store. The purpose is to focus people on the key objectives for the day, talk about specific actions for

individuals, and provide a quick update on how the store and business is doing generally.

The UK supermarket group Tesco uses a similar system called "T5." The T5 briefings are literally five-minute meetings where supervisors discuss day-to-day business needs with their direct reports. The meetings also provide an opportunity to discuss what needs to be done to help individuals achieve their personal objectives, addressing the "what's in it for me" factor while still painting the bigger picture.

2. Find out what the issues are:

When I worked for The Body Shop, its founder Anita Roddick would quite regularly sit down with the tea ladies or the production line staff for her "belly-to-belly" chats to find out what the real issues were in the company. Then she would tell middle managers exactly what needs to be changed.

3. Develop guidelines for managers:

Tesco supports line manager communication by helping managers develop skills to deliver good team briefings. For example, managers have been encouraged to "use the skills of the newsroom," i.e., to communicate in headlines for maximum impact.

The Office of National Statistics in the UK has worked with its line managers to create a new team meeting process. The new program includes a session with directors to plan messages for the year, a toolkit to help managers develop their own delivery style, and ideas to gain feedback and develop local agendas.

4. Allow local managers flexibility:

When the foodservice organization Compass Group wanted to communicate its new vision and values to its 400,000 employees in

90 countries, it developed guidelines for managers. The guidelines outlined the core of the new vision and values so that this would remain consistent, but it allowed flexibility for local managers to interpret the information in a relevant and meaningful way.

5. Create pressure from below:

To encourage managers to brief their teams on a change program, the board at Mark & Spencer sent out an e-mail to all staff with highlights from a management meeting discussing the change. The e-mail stressed that employees could discuss the program with their managers. This created pressure from below in that employees were now in a position to demand more news and information from their supervisors.

6. Always ask for feedback:

When investment management company INVESCO restructured its business across Europe, reactions to the changes were measured through face-to-face communication at each stage of the process.

Starting with a board-level workshop, senior managers were asked about their understanding of the change, commitment to it and perceived impact on business performance. Reactions were then used to feed into and prepare for the next round of communication with the next level of management.

Feeding back results and working through the issues clarified how everyone could move forward within their own areas. It also helped managers understand the impact of their own views and behavior on how confident employees felt about the changes.

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¹ Larkin & Larkin, *Communicating the Big Change*.

Melcrum has recently produced an in-depth report on manager communication called "Making managers better communicators." For more information e-mail charlotte.butler@melcrum.com



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