

Employee Benefit ■ Plan Review

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Make Technology Work for You: Communicating with Employees During Tough Times

It is human nature to clam up when times are tough. So it is not surprising that many companies begin to shut down communication when the business begins to struggle. Sadly, often some of the first people to be let go are marketing and communication professionals—the very professionals a business needs most when business slows down and significant changes are occurring.

This is a time to make certain the essential communication tools are being used as effectively as possible. Determining their effectiveness does not require a major investment, but it does require a professional communicator who has the experience and knowledge to identify what works well and what can be shelved. It comes down to a simple question: Is it a nice to have, or a need to have?

This is an opportunity to make technology work for you, if those you want to reach embrace electronically driven communication tools. There are two communication functions that are essential during tough times: Maintaining at least basic levels of internal communication and marketing/member communication. Of the two, employee communication should be a priority. If you take care of your employees, they will be equipped to take care of your members.

The challenge becomes validating your employees' preferred tools and creating a communication plan that has the appropriate mix of online, face-to-face, and hard copy instruments to optimize the opportunities to share information with those you most need to reach. While technology enables us to reach just about anyone, any place, and at any time, beware of the siren song of technology before you launch into building Facebook pages or opening Twitter accounts. Why? Effective communication entails much more than the delivery system.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR EMPLOYEES' COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Assess your existing internal communication tools to identify the methods that have the greatest ability to influence how employees understand and respond to information about your organization's goals and their roles in meeting those goals. Always keep in mind that online communication tools are not a substitute for face-to-face communications. One constant about where employees prefer to get key information is leadership—preferably in real time and in person. The appropriate leader to deliver the news—good or bad—depends on the content. The CEO or president is the preferred source about the organization's goals and status; whereas, the business unit leader needs to deliver information about changes specific to that unit.

Using intranets, e-mails, and other electronically driven tools are very effective in supporting and enhancing face-to-face communication. For example, when the news is not positive, deliver it face-to-face. Because it may not be possible for the designated leader to be all places in person, technology can deliver an interactive environment in which employees can see, hear, and respond to the person delivering the hard facts. However, do not let a delayed video program be the substitute for face-to-face when you have employees working first, second, and third shifts in a single location. Your leaders can afford to lose a little sleep occasionally.

Supplement this initial more personal communication delivery system with online interactive tools that employees can access to stay current about an evolving situation, ask questions through a low risk, confidential means and post responses or, in some cases, send a personal response. Blogs, phone hotlines, and special anonymous e-mail systems

are just three tools that can supplement face-to-face and real time video communication.

CONTENT IS KEY TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

After the delivery methods are determined and before they are deployed, focus on the tone of the messages, especially when managing tough news in tough times. Negative news will be accepted with less backlash if the spokesperson refrains from trying to make it sound better than it is in reality. Candor and honesty delivered with compassion and empathy will help keep the emotional levels more stable.

It is sad to have to bring this point into the discussion, but the reality is too many leaders lie to their employees and customers. They generally get away with it for a time, however, as several recent corporate debacles demonstrated, they get caught eventually resulting in extremely costly and public displays of the issues. Public relations consultants and lawyers have gotten

rich working to fix problems that could have been avoided if only the lies had never been told. In this situation, technology can be the conduit that spreads the stories, rumors, and accusations. The term “viral” when referring to using technology to carry messages lives up to its label.

This does not mean that proprietary information should be revealed or that information that could have a material impact on a pending business arrangement should be shared with all audiences. It simply means that one does not lie about the information that is being shared and that one does not deny facts known to be true.

For example, if an acquisition is likely to cause a loss of jobs, it is unethical to tell employees that jobs will not be eliminated. Be honest and say that the acquisition will result in some reorganization and it is undetermined how existing positions will be affected. Then, commit to providing that information when a new structure has been determined. Also, be clear about how you devel-

oped the process to identify the new structure, how and when it will be implemented, and what plans are in place for those whose positions will no longer exist.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BEGINS WITH A PLAN

Implementing the right communication tools begins with a plan that is tied to the organization’s goals. Choosing the appropriate delivery systems comes easily when the communication plan has measurable objectives based on a foundation of research. When you have clearly identified the behaviors you desire as a result of sharing information, the methods of delivery become obvious. ☼

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