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Keep communication lines open

Keeping staff updated and involved in crucial company decisions is key to employee engagement and productivity

COMMUNICATION between management and staff is the lubricant that an organisation needs to run efficiently and effectively.

Today, work has become more intricate. Knowledge and innovation are the main drivers behind an organisation's sustainability.

And with an increasingly global workforce, communication technologies and networks are crucial for a company to realise its strategies.

According to a 2008 Job Satisfaction survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), communication between staff and senior management ranks among the top five aspects of employee job satisfaction.

Organisational communication, both internal and external, may often be within the compass of the corporate communications department, but it also makes up part of the human resource (HR) department's people-management responsibilities.

Shifting gears

HR personnel have evolved from being mere custodians of standard people management processes to strategic business partners that help steer growth and innovation of an organisation.

As an integral feature of every business, HR is expected to be knowledgeable about the design of work systems in which people contribute and succeed. It is HR's role to devise work positions, hiring practices and reward and recognition schemes.

Such extensive HR functions require strong organisational communication to promote active participation and cooperation from staff from all levels, particularly during tough times.

Yet, an online poll by The GMP Group revealed that only 21 per cent of respondents said their organizations were improving staff engagement during the current recession with more regular communication from senior management.

HR should recognise the important role it plays in facilitating open and consistent internal communication as it has a direct impact on employee engagement.

Two-way street

The communication skills of organizational leaders are especially critical during tough times or when there are organisational upheavals.

Top-down directives might amplify existing barriers between management and staff, who desire opportunities for their views to be heard.

In this respect, two-way communication is essential to encourage innovation and spur greater employee engagement, loyalty and productivity.

Two-way communication facilitates the expression of opinions, ideas and interests. And entwined with employee engagement, the employee voice calls for acknowledgement and responsiveness of HR and management, which can create opportunities for staff to be involved in company decisions.

As professionals in people management matters, HR should develop and nurture a culture of open communication between management and employees. Effective communication, however, should also be combined with just policies, systems and management behaviour to establish positive ties between staff and organisation.

Engage employees

Studies have shown communication to be significant in encouraging good employee-organisation relationships. It clearly demonstrates the transparency and fairness of the company's corporate practices – a boon, surely, to its best employer branding efforts.

There are several ways for HR to promote active communication within the organisation:

- Keep it regular. Consistent updates signal to employees that management acknowledges their role as stakeholders in the company who should be kept abreast of recent developments and happenings that may affect their role in the organisation.
- Creative communication. Establish multiple routes of communication such as user-generated staff magazines, online discussions and intranet updates.
- Build a feeling of community and involvement. During an economic downturn, employees can be hit by low morale. Communication helps to inform and safeguard the workforce as well as protect the organisation's reputation.

- Make giving feedback easy. Keep lines of communication open for staff to air their views and offer suggestions. Companies can go a step further to show how problems will be identified and addressed.
- Measure and benchmark employee engagement regularly so that HR is able to address areas of concern.

Increase productivity

Research suggests that effective organizational communication has significant impact on financial performance. Watson Wyatt's 2008/2009 WorkUSA Report said companies enjoy 26 per cent higher employer productivity in addition to lower turnover risk and are more likely to attract top talent when their staff are highly engaged.

In today's highly competitive business milieu, management and departments cannot stand as silos. Close collaboration is needed not only across different functions but also between management and staff to solve organisational challenges and achieve agreed objectives.

Encouraging transparent communication and adopting suitable communication tools are some of the critical factors which contribute to effective organisational communication, and thus, employee engagement and productivity.

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