

Fixing Communication—The Employees' Universal Complaint

by Val Dantzler

In recent years, the workplace has become more complex, intensifying the need for good communication. Following are 5 tips for improving communications:

1. Start at the top. The best leaders skillfully use communication to align employees, resources, and operations with business objectives. Keep employees informed with regular and frequent communication, and it will set the example for what you expect of them.

2. Require the basics. In many cases, employees with strong technical skills have been promoted to management positions, but lack the communication skills to effectively lead people. Effective communication requires the ability to speak and write concisely and clearly, use appropriate body language and tone, actively listen, and maintain a two-way dialogue. Such skills should be a part of every firm's performance evaluation criteria, and training should be used to strengthen those skills.

3. Eliminate fear. Managers often limit communication with employees because they're uncomfortable addressing sensitive issues, don't know how to handle conflict, or fear legal backlash. Adequate training on employment law and coaching on handling conflict can overcome these issues, and training costs much less than a six-figure lawsuit.

4. Manage emotions. Employees have been scarred by recent turmoil in the business world resulting from poor leadership (e.g., company closures, layoffs, scandals, bank bailouts, and the oil spill). Fear, uncertainty, stress, and distrust are at high levels. Executives and managers must have a high "EQ" (Emotional Quotient) to intelligently manage their own emotions and employee emotions in the workplace. While it's important to handle situations with sensitivity, emotions must not taint the quality of business decisions.

5. Encourage feedback. Encouraging employees to provide feedback allows them to vent frustrations and can provide good ideas. Respond to all suggestions, even if the decision is not what the employee is hoping for.

Good communication starts with effective leadership, and involves everyone in the organization. Taking the above steps to improve communication will positively impact results. ■

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Balance Flexibility with Accountability

As the number of younger generation employees in the workplace increases, there's a corresponding need for more flexibility with respect to work practices. A similar situation exists with sales persons who spend a considerable amount of time outside the office.

You will likely face needs or requests for working outside the office, at odd hours, or less hours. Accommodating these without destroying the morale of others who believe strongly in face-to-face interaction and paying dues by working long hours will depend largely on having a system of accountability that rewards results, not effort. Follow these 3 steps to establish a system for rewarding results:

While it's important to handle situations with sensitivity, emotions must not taint the quality of business decisions.

• **Set measurable goals.** Develop written, quantitative annual and interim (monthly or quarterly) goals for each employee. These goals should be agreed upon by the supervisor and employee. If the employee won't agree to goals consistent with expectations of the position, then there is a personnel issue that needs to be promptly addressed.

This may require reclassification to a lower level with a corresponding pay reduction, transfer to a different role, or replacement.

• **Post the goals.** If you find that one employee's goals are so much less than another's who's at an equal position and pay grade and publishing goals creates a problem, then you've identified a situation that involves unfair and inconsistent treatment of your employees, and this needs to be corrected.

• **Monitor results.** The supervisor should monitor results at the agreed upon frequency for interim goals and provide regular performance feedback to the employee. Progress, like the goals, should be posted. In this manner it is clear what every employee is contributing, regardless of their work location or hours.

• **Reward performance.** When interim goals aren't being achieved, address the situation promptly and directly, giving the employee a chance to improve, but not dragging the situation out beyond a reasonable time period. Reward performance. Nothing will destroy your best performers' morale faster than seeing management tolerate someone who isn't pulling their weight. ■

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