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CorpCommCollab Podcast Script: Communicating Effectively with Employees.

Welcome to the podcast on *Communicating Effectively With Employees*. My name is Catherine Racette, and I am a graduate student in the Professional and Technical Communication program at New Jersey Institute of Technology. This podcast discusses why employee communication is important, and presents ideas and strategies for communicating effectively with employees.

Communication with employees can be a difficult task. It takes more than just knowing what you want to say to communicate in a way that elicits the desired result. Communications to employees often come from many areas of the company: Human Resources, Information Technology, Executive office or Departmental Managers. Communications can be formal or informal and can have a wide variety of delivery medium - e-mail, intranets, posters, memos, or discussions with supervisors or managers. Although we won't cover all medium in this podcast, we'll focus on the basic strategies that can be used for communicating with employees.

You might be wondering, "Why is employee communication so important?" At a basic level, Marcel Gingras states in his article, "The Great Communication Challenge" in the Winter 2005 issue of *Canadian Manager* magazine, "People need to know what is happening and what the company wants to achieve if they are to contribute what is expected of them, and a well-organized internal communication strategy is required to create the ideal mindset within the organization. People need to understand what the organization stands for, the vision of its leaders and the set of values that reflects the way the company wishes to operate. Beyond that," Gingras states, "good communication is required to avoid waste within

the organization and to create a sense of pride and belonging within the workforce.” According to a Watson, Wyatt & Company survey cited by Paul Argenti in his book, *Corporate Communication*, the effectiveness of communication with employees is a leading indicator of financial performance. According to Argenti, “Internal communication in the twenty-first century is more than the memos, publications, and broadcasts that comprise it; it’s about building a corporate culture based on values and having the potential to drive organizational change.” Communication with employees is a two-way street. To make employees feel that they are part of the organization and its direction, management needs to take time to not only give employees an opportunity to speak, but to listen to them; to be engaged. According to Maureen Chiquet in an interview with Daisy Waderman Dowling titled, “The Best Advice I Ever Got” in *Harvard Business Review* in 2008, Volume 86, “To lead effectively, and achieve real business results as the head of any enterprise, you have to listen. You’ve got to constantly ask questions and seek out diverse opinions, and remain humble enough to change your mind - whether about a product or a person.” A corporation is a community of people with different roles and responsibilities to serve common goals. If employees don’t understand the goals of the business and their place in achieving those goals, a company is likely not to be as successful as it could be. Often times, this engagement comes in the form of discussions between an employee and manager. A manager can help provide context to the company’s business goals and give the employee perspective on how his or her work supports these goals. It can be a source of great satisfaction for employees to feel they are part of the company’s achievements, as Argenti states that “Conversations with management promote feelings that employees themselves are serving as catalysts for organizational change.”

No matter what kind of business a company is in, it’s in a company’s best interest to inform, engage, and listen to employees. In those businesses where employees often interface with customers, making sure employees adequately represent the company as it wants to be represented is extremely important. As Chun and Davies state in the article, “Employee Happiness Isn’t Enough to Satisfy Customers” in *Harvard Business Review*, 2009, Volume 87, “To win customers’ hearts, a service

business needs engaged employees who actively transmit their enthusiasm to customers, and that there is a great deal of evidence for a causal link between happy customers and higher profits.”

It is beneficial for companies to have a strategy for communicating with employees; something that provides guidelines on the goals and parameters to communication. Communication shouldn't be considered an afterthought to another project or task. So, what are the goals? According to Argenti, “Ultimately, effective communication should reinforce employees' beliefs that they are important assets to the firm.” Although managers may not think about this goal when communicating an organizational change, they should. Employees can often perceive how the company feels about them by the way management communicates with them.

Often times the need to develop a communications strategy comes at a time when a company needs to communicate a major workplace change. As Jan Stringer of the National Research Business Institute advises in the 2006 Ezine article, *How to Communicate with Your Employees*, “To be effective, internal communication should be tackled like any other organizational task, with a defined process and according to a relatively rigid execution schedule.” Stringer also proposes that companies implement a three-step staging process.

The first step is to “Create a State of Awareness.” Essentially, in the absence of communication, employees will make up their own information about the workplace change, based on their own perspectives, and their version is often worse than the reality. Some managers would rather not communicate anything at all even when they should. As Carole Howard states in her article, “How Your Employee Communications Programs can Boost Productivity and Pride,” in *Public Relations Quarterly* in 1998, volume 43, “The problem with this approach is that we also communicate when we say nothing. Intended or not, giving out no information sends messages like, “I can't trust you with this information,” or “You are not important enough for me to waste time telling you this stuff.” Howard quotes *New York Times* reporter, Tom Friedman with saying, “Sometimes the news is in the noise and sometimes the news is in the silence.” Employees often just want truth and candor, and are interested in how the workplace change will affect them.

The second step is “Building an Informed Workplace.” This is the point of understanding for employees. The point at which communication has led employees to an understanding about why a change is happening and how it may impact their work and their employment. Managers (or whomever is communicating the information) should communicate this information truthfully and respectfully to employees. Above all else, the manager needs to be clear with what is being communicated, what it means to the employee, and what is expected of the employee.

The third step is “Achieving Workforce Commitment.” It is at this point where employees will either have decided to accept the message or reject it, or simply be skeptical of it. It’s of the utmost importance that, especially at this stage, management is visible and accessible and that they continue to communicate. Managing issues and being supportive of those who are on board is critical at this stage.

It is important that the message being communicated to employees is clear and consistent. It is confusing for an employee to hear a mixed message. The message should be the same whether it is coming from the Chairman or a supervisor, and all levels of management should understand the workplace change and be on board themselves. Communicating a message once, is also often not enough. Repeating the message is an important part of making sure everyone in the organization has heard it and has an opportunity to understand it and ask questions.

Carole Howard makes an important point that the goal is not communications for the sake of communications. “Rather, it’s communications as a tool to help achieve your business goals - and these days, in many organizations, cultural change goals.” Howard states that the consistency and relevance of an organization’s communications, both outside and in is one of the main factors that determine a company’s reputation. Howard offers some tips on implementing an effective communications strategy. Tip #1 is to make supervisors the most important link in your communications, as studies show that employees prefer to go to their supervisor as the main source of information. Management and print are second and third preferred sources for employees after supervisors. Tip #2 is to make face-to-face communications the backbone of your internal communications strategy. You can’t ask for clarification or exchange ideas with a piece of paper. Argenti also conveys the importance of making time for face-to-

face meetings; to be held regularly with a fairly large group of employees to keep the lines of communication open. Tip #3 is not to forget that communications other than face to face are very important. Print, audio-visual and electronic communications are still useful, especially to reinforce face-to-face meetings. Argenti states that Intranets, which cropped up in the late 1990s, provided a new channel through which companies could reach their employees quickly and broadly with important news on events and key management initiatives. Argenti cautions, however, that Internet technology, though extremely powerful, must be used thoughtfully if it is to enhance communication rather than detract from the impact of management's messages. With the constant information overload that technology has allowed to occur for employees, management needs to invest quite a bit of thought into being effective and that their messages are getting through to the audience. Howard's Tip #4 is not to overload the one communication with too many messages -- the messages will inevitably get lost -- better to concentrate on one or two points. Tip #5 is to tell the employees what they want to hear -- in other words, help them understand what's in it for them. Tip #6, however, is to tell employees what YOU want them to hear. Great leaders have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. It's important that this vision is communicated so employees understand the intention and the direction. Tip #7, Match your communications programs to your corporate culture, values and organizational style. If you have a small company - gather people together to communicate with them. Larger organizations, however, may be able to get the message across with more of a trickle-down communication by talking to managers, who talk with supervisors, who talk with their staff; or through more formal communications from the top leadership through electronic communication throughout the organization. Tip #8 is that major communications initiatives should always include a clear objective up front and an evaluation afterward to see if that objective was reached. Listen to feedback to determine what additional communications and training are necessary to achieve results next time. Lastly, Tip #9 Don't expect improvement in the communications climate unless your organization rewards the people who do it well. In other words, does your organization's compensation and incentives program encourage supervisors, managers and executives to spend time communicating with their people? These are just a few of Howard's tips on

communicating effectively. For a full list, review her article in *Public Relations Quarterly*. The source information for this article can be found on the launch page of this podcast.

When communicating online or in print, it's important to keep in mind the visual aspect of the communication. As Argenti states, that employees are becoming more visually oriented in their consumption of information, particularly given increased use of company's intranets. Online communication can be anything from PDF documents, to websites, to multimedia presentations. Argenti also proposes that it's important to keep branding in mind on internal communications; that often, management needs to "sell" an idea or change to employees and attention to this visual detail is often helpful in improving the message it conveys to the employees. Attention to visual detail, even breaking information down by adding introductory headings can help employees understand the information being communicated. This attention to detail should be considered an investment in the employee, to make sure the message is reviewed and understood.

There are many different sources out there that provide advice on internal communications with employees. Most can agree on several important strategies, which we have discussed in this podcast.

These include:

- Have a clear vision of what you want the objective of what you want your message to achieve
- Communicate clearly - invest in developing a message that will be listened to
- Listen to employees and regularly solicit feedback
- Make sure the message is effectively received by the intended audience. Do follow-ups to evaluate the effectiveness and learn from mistakes
- Make time for face time
- Use technology such as intranets to regularly communicate with employees
- Use supervisors as a primary source of information for employees

I'm Catherine Racette, and this has been a podcast on *Communicating Effectively With Employees*. Thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast.

Works Cited

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