

# Employee Communications

## Key concepts and terms

- Employee communication
- Speak-up programme
- Consultation
- Team briefing

## Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- The importance of employee communications
- The approach to communication
- Employee communication strategy
- What should be communicated
- Communication methods

## Introduction

Employee communication processes and systems provide for ‘two-way communication’. In one direction they enable organizations to inform employees about matters that will interest them. In the other, they provide for upward communication by giving employees a voice, as described in Chapter 56.

Communication should be distinguished from consultation. As the ACAS (2005) guide states, communication is concerned with the exchange of information and ideas within an organization while consultation goes beyond this and involves managers actively seeking and then taking account of the views of employees before making a decision.

## The importance of employee communications

Good communication is important for three reasons. First, it is a vital part of any change management programme. If any change is proposed in terms and conditions of employment, HR processes such as contingent pay, working methods, technologies, products and services or organization (including mergers and acquisitions) employees need to know what is proposed and how it will affect them. Resistance to change often arises simply because people do not know what the change is or what it implies for them. Second, commitment to the organization will be enhanced if employees know what the organization has achieved or is trying to achieve and how this benefits them. Third, effective communication generates trust as organizations take the trouble to explain what they are doing and why. However, it should be emphasized that these three benefits of good communication will only be realized in full if employees are given a voice – the opportunity to comment and respond to the information they obtain from management.

## What should be communicated?

Management and individual managers need to communicate to employees about terms and conditions of employment, what they are expected to do, learning and development opportunities, the objectives, strategies, policies and performance of the organization, and any proposed changes to conditions of employment, working arrangements and requirements, or the structure and policies of the organization.

Employees need the opportunity to communicate upwards their comments and reactions to what is proposed will happen or what is actually happening in matters that affect them; for example, pay and other terms of employment, working conditions, work–life balance, equal opportunity, job security, health and safety, and learning and development programmes.

## Approach to communication

To be effective, communication needs to be clear, easily understood and concise. Information should be presented systematically on a regular basis and be as relevant, local and timely as possible. Empathy is required by management in the sense of appreciating the concerns of employees and what they want and need to hear. Possible reactions to proposed changes should be assessed and anticipated in the communication. Attitude surveys can be used to find out what information employees want and where they feel there are any gaps that need to be filled.

A variety of communication methods will be needed; spoken and written, direct and indirect. Face-to-face communication to individuals or groups is both direct and swift and it provides an opportunity to gauge the reactions of people, who can respond on the spot and ask questions. It should be supplemented by written material or intranet communications where the information is particularly important or complex.

Written communication is most effective when the information is important, the topic requires detailed and accurate explanation, the audience is widespread or large, and there is need for a back-up to face-to-face communication or a permanent record. Judicious use should be made of a mix of face-to-face and written communication, using a selection of the methods described below.

## Communication methods

### Individual face-to-face communication

This is, of course, the most common method of communication but it can be the most problematic. The quality, accuracy and acceptability of the information depend largely on the skill of the managers or team leaders involved and on their commitment to doing it well. Information can be distorted or plain wrong. Briefing notes are helpful but they will not necessarily be used well. Individual communication is inevitable and necessary but should not be relied upon in isolation when the subject matter is important.

### Team briefing

A team briefing aims to overcome the limited scope for communication through individuals or even joint consultative committees by involving everyone in an organization, level by level, in face-to-face meetings to present, receive and discuss information. It operates as follows.

### *How a team briefing operates*

- Organization – covers all levels in the business with the fewest possible steps from top to bottom. There should be between four and 18 in each group and the group should be run by its team leader or manager (who must be given training).
- Subjects – policies, plans, progress and people.
- Operation – work to a brief prepared by the board on key issues. The brief is written up and cascaded down the organization. Briefs are discussed at meetings and comments are fed back to the top to provide for two-way communication.
- Timing and duration – meet when there is something to discuss. Meetings last no more than 20–30 minutes.

Team briefing can work well as long as there is enthusiasm for it at the top that is transmitted throughout the organization. It depends on good briefing and managers or team leaders who have the necessary communication and interpersonal skills.

### Consultative committees

Joint consultation provides a channel for two-way communication, but committees are not always effective. Their discussions can be confined to relatively trivial issues and there is still the problem of disseminating information around the organization – committee members cannot do this on their own. Minutes can be posted on notice boards but may not be read. It is better to highlight key points either on notice boards or through other channels.

### Notice boards

Notice boards are the most obvious and familiar means of communication but they can too easily be cluttered up with redundant information. It is necessary to control what goes on to boards and ensure that out-of-date or unauthorized notices are removed.

### Speak-up programmes

Speak-up programmes provide unique channels for individual employees to raise points with senior management concerning the organization and its plans and policies. This can be through the intranet.

## Intranet

Organizations are increasingly relying on an internal e-mail system (the intranet) to communicate information, especially in workplaces where all or most of the employees have access to a computer. The advantage of intranet communication is that it can be transmitted swiftly to a wide audience. It can also be used for two-way communication – employees can be invited to respond to questions or surveys.

A communication dashboard can be created for departmental websites that displays performance metrics in a visual form, as on a car dashboard.

## Magazines

Glossy magazines or house journals are obvious ways to keep employees informed about the activities and achievements of the organization. There is, however, a danger of such magazines being more about public relations than about matters of real interest to employees.

## Newsletters and bulletins

Newsletters can appear more frequently than magazines and can angle their contents more to the concerns of employees. They may be distributed in addition to a house magazine, treating the latter mainly as a public relations exercise.

Bulletins can be used to give immediate information to employees that cannot wait for the next issue of a newsletter.

# Employee communication strategy

A strategy for employee communication will deal with what information the organization wants to give to employees and how it wants to provide it. Provision should also be made for upward communication.

## Information to be made available

The strategy should be based on an analysis of what management wants to say and what employees want to hear on a regular basis. It should also cover provision for upwards communication. The analysis could refer to the areas of interest set out earlier in this chapter.

It may also be necessary to develop a specific communication strategy for any proposed major changes to terms and conditions, working arrangements such as downsizing, or organization structure, including mergers and acquisitions. For example, the introduction of a new pay

structure is a major change exercise and will need to be supported by a planned communication strategy.

## Providing the information

The strategy should cover the mix of methods that will be used to convey the information – face-to-face (individual or team), notice boards, intranet and magazines, newsletters or bulletins.

## Upward communication

The strategy should also provide for upward communication through consultative committees, team briefing, speak-up programmes and the intranet.

### Employee communication – key learning points

#### **The importance of employee communication**

A vital part of a change management programme, increase commitment, generate trust.

#### **What should be communicated**

Management and individual managers need to communicate to employees about terms and conditions of employment, what they are expected to do, learning and development opportunities, the objectives, strategies, policies and performance of the organization, and any proposed changes to conditions of employment, working arrangements and requirements, or the structure and policies of the organization. Employees need the opportunity to communicate upwards their comments and reactions to what is proposed will happen or what is actually happening in matters that affect them.

#### **The approach to communication**

Communication needs to be clear, easily understood and concise. Information should be presented systematically on a regular basis and be as relevant, local and timely as possible.

#### **Communication methods**

Individual face-to-face communication, team briefing, consultative committees, notice boards, speak-up programmes, intranet, magazines, newsletters and bulletins.

#### **Employee communication strategy**

A strategy for employee communication will deal with what information the organization wants to give to employees and how it wants to provide it. Provision should also be made for upward communication.

## Questions

1. You have been asked to give a talk at your local CIPD branch conference on 'Upwards communication: what does it mean and what is its value to employers and employees?' Prepare an outline of your talk with supporting evidence on good practice from your own organization or elsewhere.
2. From your managing director: 'What's this I hear about team briefing? Is it for us and, if so, how do we benefit?'
3. What are the main barriers to communication and how can they be overcome?

## Reference

ACAS (2005) *Guide to Communications*, ACAS, London

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