

Organizational Communications

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Is it time to formalize your organization's communications program? Most HR practice leaders would agree that linking your organization's communications program with your strategic planning process to achieve organizational goals and objectives simply makes good business sense.

In fact, in a recent *SHRM®/USA Today Job Satisfaction Poll* of both HR professionals and employees, the importance of communication between employees and management was ranked as either very important or important by 98% of all HR professionals. Participating employees mirrored this ranking closely at 96% (see Chart 1).

The message should be loud and clear—employees want to be kept in the information loop.

With rare exception, most would agree that a comprehensive communications program can help to motivate employees and align their efforts with the goals of the organization.

Ten Key Principles Required for a Successful Communications Program

1. Role of CEO. The CEO is the role model for senior management. As the CEO goes, so goes the rest of the management team. For this reason, it is critical that the CEO maintain a high level of visibility in relation to the program. Employees need to see clear evidence of support for the organization's communications program by the CEO if the program is to be successful. For example, is the CEO approachable,

does he/she personally endorse the organization's open door policy, is he/she available for employee meetings on a regular basis?

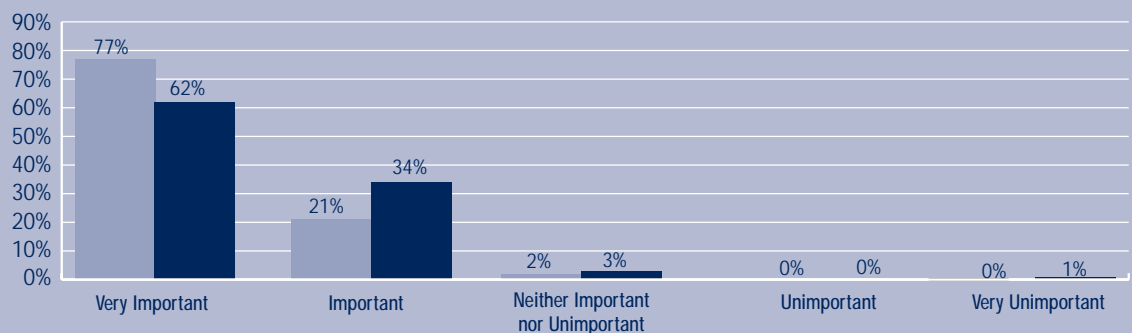
2. Role of senior management. Similarly, senior management serves as an extension of the CEO and as a role model for the rest of the management team. Consistency, constancy of purpose, and accessibility are critical elements. Inaction, inconsistency and lack of accessibility are serious drawbacks to a successful program.

3. Create a communications strategy. Establishing a focused communications strategy aids the communications process and ensures that employees receive and understand the information they need within the time frame prescribed. The strategy and its communication must resonate with the culture and core purpose of the organization. Ten characteristics of an effective communications strategy are outlined in Chart 2.

4. Use multiple communication vehicles. Getting the right messages to employees is facilitated through a focused communications strategy that includes a variety of communications methods and tools. The possibilities are extensive and are generally influenced by organizational culture and technological sophistication. Examples include: "state of the company" meetings, department staff meetings, newsletters (printed or electronic), memoranda and letters, company intranets, open door policies, lunch with the president/senior management, and staff e-mails. A variety a methods should be used in order to reinforce the message(s) over time.

Chart 1 Importance of Communication Between Employees and Management

■ HR Professionals (Number of respondents=460)
■ Employees (Number of respondents=604)



Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
Source: SHRM®/USATODAY.com Job Satisfaction Poll

Chart 2 The 10 Characteristics of Effective Communications

1. Senior management must recognize the importance of communications in achieving business objectives.
2. Senior management should base all communication efforts on a clear, well-defined communications strategy.
3. Senior managers must tie communications initiatives to corporate business objectives.
4. The organization should provide information to employees about how the firm is doing in meeting its goals.
5. Communications programs must be developed proactively rather than reactively.
6. Employee communications programs must place a strong emphasis on helping employees understand the business.
7. The organization should have a well-defined, two-way communications philosophy.
8. A comprehensive communications program must place a strong emphasis on providing information and feedback to motivate and improve job performance.
9. Managers at all levels should be rewarded for communicating effectively.
10. Employee communications programs must place a strong emphasis on providing information and feedback to motivate and improve job performance.

Source: Adapted from Watson Wyatt/IABC Research Foundation Study: Linking Communication With Strategy to Achieve Business Goals, 1999

5. Communications training. Basic training in fundamentals of communication is a prerequisite for all successful organizational communication programs. Such training ensures a consistent understanding of the organization's communications philosophy, a common program language, and clarification of roles and responsibilities in relation to the program.

6. Safeguard credibility. If employees perceive a lack of consistency in what the organization does versus what it says, a credibility gap will occur. Once this happens, it is often difficult to recover. This can have long-lasting repercussions on employee morale and, in turn, productivity. Senior management can safeguard organizational credibility by giving straight answers to difficult questions.

7. Actively listen. Listen first with the intention to understand, only then can you listen with the intention to respond. All too often we try to form a response in the midst of a conversation. Take time to **"listen with understanding."**

8. Seek input. People who care about their company want to talk about what they think, share how they feel, and let you know their opinion on what should be done to resolve certain issues. Possible ways to collect information from interested employees include: questionnaires, focus groups, attitude surveys and anecdotal feedback from managers.

9. Provide feedback. Some companies conduct regular surveys of their employees to determine if their communications program is on track and to determine if it is accomplishing what it was designed to do. Questionnaires and audits should be designed to periodically measure program success. Key findings and program changes should be shared with affected audiences as they are identified and/or occur.

10. Revisit communications strategy. Periodically revisit your overall communications strategy to assess where it is helping your organization to meet its goals and objectives and where it is falling short. Take remedial action as necessary to improve the plan.

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