

absolutely business



Singing from the same hymn sheet

By Denise Walker FREC

I see some fantastic recruitment companies on my travels – businesses which are well-run, with inspirational leadership and great staff. Invariably, each individual in these businesses focuses on the same goals and the result is that they are clearly maximising their potential, in terms of sales, customer satisfaction and staff motivation and retention. They usually have a lot of fun too. In contrast to this, I also see some potentially fantastic companies which, although profitable, do not enjoy the same level of results. And usually, the reason for this is simply poor internal communication.

Each aspect of running a successful business takes an investment of time and effort and, in my experience (of running my own companies and supporting all types of recruitment businesses), internal communication is no exception. But, for the best effect, it needs to be done at the most appropriate time and with the most appropriate people. For example, it's no good attempting to gain buy-in for new strategic concepts from a branch manager when they are covering the 100-strong temp desk, whilst the temps controller is on holiday!

If you'd like to know how busy SME owner/managers can successfully deal with this important issue in a practical way, please read on...

Set the scene

Business plan: Most owners of thriving businesses would have written a business plan when first setting up and this should be updated each year. I'm not suggesting a full blown business plan but a précised version, comprising 1) areas for development, 2) objectives for the year, 3) a SWOT analysis and 4) the financial forecast. Once this is completed, the directors know the aims for the year and can share relevant information with the rest of the staff: it is especially important for them to have an overview of where the company is going but, more importantly, what it means to them, where they fit into the bigger picture and how it will affect their role.

Standards: There should be a clear method of ensuring that everyone in your business knows exactly what your company's working standards are. This should be a written statement that people can refer to and should be specific, so that there is no ambiguity. For example, they could include: "To respond to candidate enquiries on the day they are received", "To obtain signed terms of business and visit all clients before working on their jobs".

KPIs: *If used properly*, these can be highly motivational to staff, because they can see how they can influence their activities to achieve the desired results. For example, if you want your staff to aim for a 3:1 ratio of CVs sent to interviews attended, a consultant who is currently achieving a 6:1 ratio will see that their effort is not resulting in the desired outcome. They are therefore much more likely to accept help from their manager, to enable them to properly focus their activities.

Style: This is important, because people feel much more comfortable if the workplace is an open environment, where issues are dealt with in a proactive and positive way – and confidentially when appropriate. Methods of communication should be visible and all staff should have their views heard and know that they are taken seriously (the most successful ideas in one of my businesses often came from a very shy receptionist, who would never have shared these views in less open surroundings). In-house politics is the kiss of death to open communication and should be avoided at all times!

Schedule time for communication

Meetings: I'm sure that there are some that believe the tired old joke that meetings are a viable alternative to work – and, if meetings are poorly managed, this is inevitably true. I do not advocate running meetings for meeting's sake – but I do believe that scheduled meetings for specific purposes and where an agenda is used and the minutes and actions recorded are essential for the effective running of businesses. These include:

- For strategy – an AGM and quarterly board meetings, where the directors/senior management can debate and plan for strategic level (not operational) issues. Board meetings usually comprise a comparison of sales and finances against the business plan.
- For operations – monthly or quarterly sales meetings (usually followed by a trip to the pub!) help to ensure that strategic decisions are “interpreted” for operational staff and to encourage team work. More “nitty-gritty” operational topics are typically covered at weekly branch meetings, for example, KPIs, sales figures, open jobs, candidates registered and branch issues. The best of these are very positive, where the manager actively encourages the team to discuss what went well in the week.

Use the right tools

Setting an example: By far, the best communication method I have seen is where directors and managers lead by example, literally setting the scene for their staff. (And the worst is where the management ask for one thing from their staff and do exactly the opposite!).

Staff management: I truly believe that one of the best communication tools a company can use is its staff management – including criteria-based recruitment, training, measuring and monitoring. If these are right, then your company's messages will be communicated from the start and reinforced on a regular basis. But, for this to work well, each aspect should be objective, rather than subjective (and open to misinterpretation). For example, rather than saying in an appraisal “You did quite well this year”, use specific measurement, such as “In the period under review, you regularly met most of the criteria of your role and there are some areas for improvement”.

In conclusion...

I hope you agree that it's good to “sing from the same hymn sheet” – and that managed in the most effective way, internal communication can bring measurable benefits to your business.

About Denise Walker FREC

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