

Communicating with employees

Poor communication is one of the most common criticisms employees have about the businesses they work for. Employees complain that managers give poor instructions, they feel uninformed about what is happening within the company and often feel that their views are unheard, unacknowledged, or even ignored.

This can lead to misunderstandings, poor performance, low morale and wasted time. More seriously, poor communication could mean you breach employees' rights and break the law.

This briefing looks at communication to and from employees. It covers:

- The information you must communicate.
- Preparing your message.
- How to communicate your message effectively.
- Achieving two-way communication.

1 What to communicate

1.1 Fulfil your **obligations** by providing employees with the information they are entitled to.

- You are legally obliged to provide every employee (full or part-time) with a written statement covering a number of specified terms and conditions. You must issue the statement within two months of the employment commencing. See **Employment contracts**.
- All employees must be provided with an itemised pay slip.

- You must consult with individual employees and, if you propose making more than 20 staff redundant, their representatives. See **Redundancy**.
- Employees are entitled to statutory notice periods if you are dismissing them, and the reasons why if they are requested in writing. See **Dismissing employees**.
- Under EU rules, businesses with more than 100 employees have to notify and discuss, with their employees, any changes likely to affect their jobs. Penalties for non-compliance can be up to £75,000. Businesses with more than 50 employees will have to comply from April 2008.

1.2 Give your employees the **factual** information they need.

- People cannot comply with policies and

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procedures they are unaware of. (See **Everyday workplace policies**).

1.3 Provide the information that helps employees do their **job**.

- Provide training and technical information that explains how tasks must be carried out, such as operating manuals or 'knowledge banks'.
- Give staff details of product specifications, availability and price lists.
- Make your computerised and hard-copy filing system easy to use. Your system should be organised so that anyone can find the information they need first time. See **Filing and records management**.
- Set clear objectives and provide job descriptions to let people know what is expected of them.
- Explain and monitor the key performance indicators for each individual. (See **Key performance indicators**). Tackle under achievement by providing feedback, support and further training, if necessary.

1.4 Give people **motivational** information.

- Publicly recognise individual, team and company achievements. For example,

thank employees during team meetings or publicise success stories on a notice board or in a company newsletter.

- Use regular performance appraisals to recognise achievements and discuss areas for improvement (see **Performance appraisals**). Use appraisals as an opportunity to gather feedback from the 'shop floor' on how the company could improve.

See **Motivating employees**.

1.5 Give people information about **special situations** that will affect them.

- Tell employees when change is coming, what form it will take and how it will impact on them.

See **Managing change**.

2 Preparing your message

2.1 Before communicating, be clear what you are trying to **achieve**.

- Break down your message into a series of points that you want to get across. The fewer, the better.

2.2 Find out about your **audience**. Are you communicating with one person or a group?

- Are they interested in what you have to say? Are they already well informed? Are they likely to be receptive or hostile to the information you are communicating?
- Consider the timing of your message. A busy person is unlikely to take in much information unless the message is directly relevant to the job in hand.

2.3 **Structure** your message carefully.

- Start by explaining the purpose of the communication.
- Present your ideas in order of importance.
- Organise written information by using clear numbering and headings.
- In a meeting, end by summing up all the important points again.

2.4 Use **language** your audience understands.

- Use simple, direct words and short sentences.
- Avoid vagueness. For example, 'Mike will check the work tomorrow' is clearer than 'The work will be checked'.

“Wherever possible, communicate with your employees face to face. People listen more closely to the spoken word and you can get their feedback there and then. The personal touch is always preferable.”
Maggie Docker, RightCoutts

Communication pitfalls

- A** Be careful about dashing off **emails** too quickly.
- They may encourage a rapid, unthinking response that you will later regret.
- B** Recognise that the **written word** is sometimes inappropriate. If the message you have to convey is personal or of a sensitive nature, make sure you deliver it face to face.
- Written communication can be misinterpreted just as easily as the spoken word.
- C** Keep your **notice boards** up to date, relevant and interesting, or people will not bother to read what is displayed there.
- Make sure they are used to communicate substantial or important material.
- D** Over-use of **visual aids**, such as PowerPoint, during presentations can significantly reduce their impact. Use them sparingly.

- Use jargon and technical terms sparingly. Specialist vocabulary, such as that used in finance, IT and production, will confuse and often irritate non-specialists.

3 Communication methods

How, when and to whom people communicate is crucial to the running of a business. Many problems arise simply because information is not communicated to the relevant people.

3.1 Communicate important, sensitive or controversial information **face to face**.

Personal communication skills

A Ask questions that draw out ideas, as well as information. This is partly a question of using the right techniques.

- Ask positive, open-ended questions to involve people in solving problems. Open questions are phrased so that the answers are not just 'Yes' or 'No'.
- You can then follow up with more specific, closed, 'yes or no' questions.
- Avoid letting the way you phrase a question imply that there are no other options or alternatives you can choose.

B A key ingredient in good communication is the ability to **listen** and **understand**.

- Use paraphrase to check what you think you have heard. Ask 'Am I right in thinking that you think...?' or 'So, just to be clear, are you saying...?'
- Show you are listening by responding to what is being said, without interrupting.
- Do not answer on someone else's behalf or finish off what is being said. Not only is it off-putting and rude, but your assumptions about what is about to be said may be wrong.
- Do not show impatience.

C Your **body** is also a powerful element in communicating with people.

- Maintain eye contact.
- Avoid defiant or defensive postures, like talking to people with your arms tightly folded in front of you, and aggressive gestures, such as pointing at people.
- Avoid fillers, such as 'um', 'er', 'like' and 'you know', that reveal your uncertainty and make others feel uncertain.
- In one-to-one meetings, sit side by side if the aim is to solve a problem together.

- Be prepared to be unpopular, especially if your news is bad.
- Allow time for feedback and objections. It can take time to come to terms with news, particularly if it is unexpected.

3.2 Use the **telephone** (or a meeting, see 4) to discuss matters and to reach a quick agreement on a course of action.

- Spend a few seconds writing down the discussion points before making a call. You can then focus on each point, without worrying about where the whole conversation is going.
- When taking phone messages for other people, include your own name, so you can clarify the message later, if necessary. Include the date, so nobody thinks it is a new message a week later.

A phone call is an interruption that can harm the productivity of the other person. Ask yourself whether an email is more appropriate.

3.3 Use a **memo** (internally) or a **letter** (externally) to confirm agreements in writing.

- The conventional memo format is effective. You can see at a glance who wrote the memo to whom, when and about what. This makes retrieving the information at a later date much easier.

3.4 Use **email** for simple matters that the recipient can deal with at their convenience.

- An email provides a written record of what was said, and is quick and informal. You can easily send letters, reports, artwork or spreadsheets as an attachment.
- Email provides many opportunities and risks that people may be unaware of. For example, emails cannot normally be deleted from computer hard drives.

Damaging information in emails could be used against you. See **Email**.

3.5 Switch on **answering machines** or **voicemail** only when you really need to.

- For example, when you are in a meeting or away from your desk.

4 Meetings

4.1 Use meetings to keep your **teams** informed and motivated. (See **Teambuilding**).

“After you have instructed someone about doing a task, check his or her understanding. This simple step prevents 90 per cent of all problems arising.”

Matt Cambridge,
The Expedition
Company

“If you don't communicate with your employees, or if communication breaks down, disasters occur out of the blue and cause much more damage.”

Amanda
Galashan,
EmployEase

- If you employ less than ten or 12 people, consider holding a short weekly meeting for the whole company. Use this to review progress and problems and to build a sense of team identity.
- Make sure information flows both ways during meetings by actively listening during discussions. Ask open questions to encourage employees to participate.

4.2 Organise meetings efficiently.

- Make the objective of each meeting clear and circulate an agenda in good time.
- Keep discussions focused on the agenda. After discussing each point, assign responsibility to an individual to complete the agreed action by a certain date.
- End by summing up the important points.
- Circulate minutes within two days.
- If people are absent, make sure they are copied with any relevant information. Inform any other people affected by decisions taken at the meeting.

5 Effective presentations

Whether you are talking to one individual or a room full of people, presentation skills help you get your message across.

5.1 Involve your audience.

- Summarise what you are going say, say it, then summarise what you have said.
- Use prompts such as OHP slides or cards with a few key words typed in large print. Do not read your speech from a typed-out sheet. Your audience will stop listening.
- If part of your audience is hostile, try to focus on one friendly face.
- Take questions. If you cannot answer on the spot, say you will provide an answer as soon as you can. Make sure you do.

5.2 In a formal presentation, **reinforce** the spoken word.

- Speak a little louder and more slowly than you normally would.
- Use visual aids carefully, such as flip charts and whiteboards, when gathering ideas or trying to work out solutions to problems.

6 Two-way communication

6.1 Build **trust**, by keeping in touch with employees. You must be approachable.

- If trust is not there, employees tend to hold

back from telling you 'bad news'.

Problems may reach crisis point before you know they exist.

- Walk the job and talk to people. Listen more than you talk. Write up brief notes afterwards and act on the feedback you receive.
- Keep asking employees for their thoughts and ideas on all aspects of your business, including your strategy as a whole. The feedback is valuable and people will be motivated by this inclusive approach.
- Get to know employees and show an interest in what interests them.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep, or do not intend to keep.

6.2 **Prove** that you are not just paying lip service to the idea of communication.

- Continually ask questions and pay attention to the answers you receive.
- Encourage suggestions from employees and reward those that are adopted, whether or not you have a formal suggestion scheme.
- Respond to every suggestion you receive. If you do not take up an idea, explain your reasoning and make it clear to the proposer that you value the contribution.

6.3 Provide **help** for employees who have difficulty communicating.

- For example, some people lack the necessary confidence to communicate easily (see **Assertiveness**). Others may need training in writing skills or in how to use email.

6.4 Be prepared to take **criticism** and to hear things you might not like.

- Focus on the validity of what is being said rather than your own feelings.
- Do not make excuses that will not stand close scrutiny.
- Accept when you have made mistakes and take steps to rectify them.

If employees view you as honest, they are more likely to develop an open and forthcoming relationship with you.

6.5 Use **social events** to break down barriers within the company.

- A drink together in the pub is often the simplest solution.
- Arrange social events for all employees at least once a year. Make sure the company pays.

Expert contributors

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Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as **Everyday workplace policies**.

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