

This Management Digest is prepared for the aspiring managers as an update to what they already know. This newsletter is sent monthly to members of the Hong Kong Institute of Marketing and delegates following courses provided through Consort Management Consultants Ltd.

COMMUNICATIONS

The Price of Success

Organisations can probably be classified into three sizes – large, medium and small. A small company has a simple structure and each manager in it performs a wide range of functions, large and small. As companies mature and grow, organisation structures and job functions will progressively become more and more complicated and managers can no longer be able to handle several jobs at the same time. Delegation and use of professionals for specialist jobs then become a typical approach to effective business management.

SMEs generally are managed with flexibility and can respond to changes very quickly. The distance between management and operations is short, so with first hand and comprehensive knowledge of almost everything happening around the business, managers are able to deal with changing situations immediately.

In larger corporations, as the volume of work grows and the decision process gets more complicated, delegation and sharing of work become essential. The result is a longer path for information to be transmitted between different points in an organisation. So, to overcome the problems of communication brought about by delegation, there will have to be systems and procedures in place for the senior management to be fed with updated and timely information.

Beside the issues of basic information handling, bigger organisations are also faced with problems of coordination – to ensure that each component part is working towards a common goal. This calls for guidelines, procedures, systems of performance monitoring and planning, and management information generally.

Managing the quality of information then becomes an important aspect of management. Delegation, if not handled properly, could lead to misinformation. Effective delegation calls for clearly specified scopes of duties so that there is no misunderstanding of the roles, authority and responsibility of individuals. Corporate goals cannot be displaced by personal ambition – so that a small authority must not be conveniently used to achieve personal objectives ('the goals of displacement').

Displacements can be minimised by setting up objective systems for information flow. Having more than one person or department to handle a project such as customer surveys, an internal audit system, regular market



review and assessments are examples of an objective and task oriented organisation. An objective manager is one who would always consider the quality and authenticity of the information in front of him. The larger is an organisation, the more remote are the managers from first hand information. So, it becomes a skill of the most senior to watch for displacements and sieve off unreliable information objectively.

But these are probably nice problems to have – as fruits of growth and success.

*Ernest Ngai,
Education Committee Chairman, HKIM.*

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Staff Communication

Seeking input from employees sounds like a good idea, but success in doing so is often obstructed by poorly planned initiatives that alienate rather than inspire. Success of such schemes is doubtful if there is over-reliance on textbook schemes without considering specific needs of an organisation. Here is a checklist of the key areas for consideration.

1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE AND GOALS

Too many organisations seeking employee ideas do not adequately consider the staff's priorities, needs and issues. To create the trust and understanding that gives employees the confidence to submit their views and suggestions – and to feel they will be listened to – employers need to understand their audience in more depth and tailor identification, communication and recognition processes accordingly.

2. WELCOME ALL IDEAS

Employers sometimes expect a "big idea" when seeking staff suggestions and develop

systems that fail to cater for ideas on smaller changes. These small changes can have a significant cumulative effect in delivering improvements for the organisation. A truly participative culture will recognise this, and employers should encourage employees to submit any ideas they feel will improve the organisation in whatever way.

3. INVOLVE BUSINESS LEADERS

Senior management buy-in is a prerequisite for success. Their agreement and visible commitment to seeking employee input acts as a signal of the organisation's sincerity and eagerness to engage with employees.

HR needs to help senior managers to understand the impact of their behaviour on managers and the wider employee base. They should also work with senior managers to harness the opportunities that presentations, site visits and employee contact programmes offer, to emphasise the importance of employee input to business progress. But they should not interfere or provide any impression of pressure. An environment needs to be created where the best ideas come from within, without any sense of "idea by edict".

4. WORK WITH THE GATEKEEPERS

Managers and supervisors can act as barriers to – or facilitators of – an effective participative culture. HR should involve them consistently and motivate them to engage with employees. Tactics could include feeding key messages and examples of success into team briefings, adding employee participation as a new section to managerial workshops, and



holding targeted briefings on any formal suggestion schemes.

On a more informal basis, tactics should include working with managers to identify how to make best use of existing structures, such as team meetings and day-to-day liaison, or to think about additional, ad hoc mechanisms such as "open mike" spots at meetings or "brown bag" lunches. These are steps within the fabric of day-to-day life that could help employees to feel more valued and involved, and therefore more willing to give their suggestions for improvements.

5. SEE FORMAL SCHEMES IN CONTEXT

A formal suggestion scheme can be the jewel in the crown of a participative culture, but it can only work effectively if the ground has been prepared. It also needs to be well designed, resourced and managed to meet the needs of the organisation.

Employers need to think about what type of scheme is appropriate – for example, formal employee panels, telephone suggestion lines, or even paper-based approaches. What is appropriate will depend on the existing infrastructure and employee preferences, as well as what the employer can logistically manage.

6. COMMUNICATE WITH EMPLOYEES

Communication is the key to raising awareness, generating credibility and inspiring participation. Employees need to see that the organisation is seeking their input, to understand why and to see how they can contribute. And they need to believe that this commitment runs more than skin deep. To achieve this, there should be a continual drip approach that

uses existing communication channels and structures wherever possible so that employees see the requirement for input and suggestions as part of business as usual. Existing briefing structures, employee forums, newsletters and intranets can all play a part in communicating the organisation's desire for employee input and for celebrating success.

7. ENSURE CLEAR RECOGNITION AND REWARD

Any employee is likely to ask, "What does it mean for me?" and HR needs to work with managers on appropriate recognition procedures for the organisation and workforce concerned. Financial rewards are sometimes appropriate (for example, spot prizes from managers for good suggestions), but can be divisive and become mired in complex evaluation criteria. Research also shows that recognition is itself enough of a reward; HR should therefore work with managers to ensure that employee involvement and innovation are recognised in the appraisal process.

8. GIVE FEEDBACK

In a more formal suggestion scheme, HR should make sure that employees who submit an idea receive a personal response to thank them. Failure to acknowledge employee ideas is far more damaging than not seeking their views at all.

If an idea has made a difference, the organisation must communicate this widely, both to demonstrate that employee ideas are valued and to inspire others to make their contribution.



9. ENGAGEMENT NEVER ENDS

Seeking employee input should be a sustained commitment from the organisation – not "yet another initiative" that fades away. Employers need to maintain the momentum by working with managers and encouraging the communication process. In this way, staff suggestions will truly become part of the business.

*(Adapted from Peoples Management
June 30, 2005)*

Communicating in Style

Take a test and find out what kind of communicator you are:

- In spite of your best efforts, a member of your team is constantly late. This morning he repeats the offence. Do you:*
 - Greet him with a sarcastic "Good afternoon!"
 - Set an appointment to discuss the issue formally.
 - Yell across the office "What time do you call this?"
 - Resolve to deal with it next time
- Your boss has asked for feedback on an important issue. Do you:*
 - Shoot from the lip and tell the boss how it is at the frontline
 - Say you'll send an e-mail when you've given it some thought
 - Agree wholeheartedly with your boss's point of view
 - Offer initial thoughts with a more detailed follow up later
- You are asked to make a presentation about your department's achievements at the next board meeting. Do you:*
 - Collect together a few anecdotes for the presentation
 - Prepare about a hundred slides backed by a full analysis document
 - Give an overview on PowerPoint, allowing time for questions
 - Not bother turning up
- One of your staff has a smoking problem and other team members have complained. Do you:*
 - Throw away his cigarettes when he is not at his desk

- Shout across the office, "O Smokey! In here!"
 - Set a one-to-one meeting and tackle the issue head on
 - Ignore it and hope the ventilation gets better
- In a meeting with peers, do you:*
 - Always take the lead to make sure you get your own way
 - Just sit and listen; it's the best way to learn
 - Shout them down if they argue with you
 - Engage in open debate and strive to reach a compromise
 - You receive an angry e-mail from a peer blaming you for a recent crisis. Do you:*
 - Respond immediately saying its not your fault
 - Take time to look into the issue and then reply
 - Apologise quickly for all the things you've done wrong
 - Copy it to the rest of the office with your own counter-accusations added

HOW YOU SCORED?

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Whilst your action-oriented approach is to be applauded, you might find others are increasingly reluctant to follow

you and may start running in the other direction when you appear. Calm down and consider where other people are coming from now and again.

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You think your communication style is just right, don't you? Well don't be too sure. Think carefully about the purpose of your communication, your audience and the mood and culture of the organization you're communicating in, or with. In each set of circumstances, imagine what it might be like for the other party, and adapt your style.

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You'll never offend anyone, but only because they won't even notice you're there. It's time to find your voice and say what you think, so stop putting off that assertiveness training because you can't make up your mind, and try, once in a while, to just go for it!

(Adapted from Professional Manager, September 2004)

