

Workers need clear channel all the way to the top

by Michael_Kinsman

Every employer knows they are going to have a certain amount of employee whining about workplace conditions.

Some of this is justified and some is not. But everyone expects complaints over some company policies or practices.

But most employers would never be able to identify the No. 1 complaint of their workers, even though they probably witness signs of it every day.

The biggest complaint is a lack of communication from senior managers, according to a survey by Opinion Research Corp. of Princeton, N.J.

Seventeen percent of workers identify the inability of managers to discuss company developments with them as their major complaint.

"Communication can be the centerpiece of a great organization or your Achilles heel," says Terry Reilly of Opinion Research. "Management's choice is pretty simple. Either they provide the information or employees will fill in the blanks on their own usually with erroneous information."

Even though human resource departments try to encourage good communication in organizations, it often doesn't work that simply.

Most senior managers simply fail to appreciate the value of it. Often they hold meetings and provide information to middle managers, who are then expected to relay that information to others in the organization.

Sometimes that gets done very well, but often the information is watered down or key facts are omitted that would help workers understand better what was occurring around them.

Downward communication in an organization has to be built into the daily operating structure. Perhaps just as important is providing a forum for workers to ask questions about business operations and get

substantive answers.

Too often companies put information into a newsletter or e-mail and expect that everyone will "get it."

What they fail to account for is that not everyone will understand fully the report and some might have questions about it or its nuances. If they have no way of expressing their concerns, the attempt by management to share information is wasted.

That's why small businesses often have an advantage in this. Senior managers are readily accessible and able to answer employee questions as they come up. Employees are more likely to ask questions when the boss is around them, rather than isolated in an office in another part of the building.

It's a lesson that should be obvious to all senior managers, but it isn't.

Employees need to have a sense of comfort that the information they are being told by management is correct. To do that, management has to be willing to say, "I don't know."

Nothing builds credibility better with workers than a senior executive who is willing to admit he or she doesn't have all the answers. Workers often don't have all the answers, and when executives admit they don't, it makes them seem candid and human.

That's a huge lesson in communication there. Make sure workers think you are candid and human when you talk to them and you can't go wrong.

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