

Effective Communication in the Workplace.

Specification requirement— Effective communication in the workplace.

Effective communication can be defined as;

'Passing relevant information, in a style and form that is clearly understandable, to the right person at the right time '

The establishment of effective communication between all levels of a business's hierarchy, is one of the keys to success in business.

Why Communicate?

Herzberg argued, communication, (with training), is one of the keys to successful motivation of employees. If employees are involved in decision making within the business, they become involved in the future success of the business.

Also key aspects of becoming a world class business, and implementing operations management methods such as just-in-time or Kaizen, depend upon the involvement and commitment of the work force. This involvement can be gained and maintained through communication.

The first stage in gaining this commitment has to be the passing of information, such as the aims and objectives of the business. Once these aims and objectives are understood by all levels within the hierarchy, then operations management systems need to be put in place, that allow involvement of workers in achieving these aims.

Perhaps the ultimate aim of communication systems and implementation of motivation theories such as Herzberg's two factor or Mayo's Human Relations School, is to make employees in large businesses behave as if they are employed by small businesses. By this I mean that employees identify with the companies objectives, feel free to and have the ability to, communicate with all levels of management, feel and behave as if the companies future is their future, and all speak 'the same language'.

When commenting on the link between communication and motivation it is worth noting that even the systems of Taylor and Ford relied on the effective implementation of instructions issued from above.

Of course there are counter arguments against the use of these 'complete communication systems' and these are examined below. But remember that, good communication and good motivation go hand in hand. Both are vital for the efficient running of a business. Communication is only good, if the information is sent in the appropriate form, then received at the right place and the right time, and understood and acted upon. And 'acted upon' can only happen if workers are motivated.

Motivation is only possible if the employees understand their roles, the company's objectives, feel they are able to contribute, and are in some way involved in corporate, product or market development. They must feel as if they belong. Effective communication can help achieve all of this.

Communication is also about understanding your customers needs. Customers have contact with an organisation through a variety of communication channels. These could be through sales staff, checkout operators, by letter, phone e-mail and so on. This communication should not be a one way process, Customers should be listened to, and information gathered should be input into the decision making process. The losses a business might suffer because of poor communication are often qualitative, and near impossible to measure.

Formal and Informal Communication

There are large number of communication methods that can be used within businesses,. These methods include; suggestion boxes, notice boards, telephone, newsletters, fax, e-mail systems, intranets, team working, formal discussions, Y-Gaya meetings, Quality Circles, HRM interviews, break-time conversations, off -the-cuff remarks.

These methods can be subdivided into two broad groups:

- Formal Communication
- Informal Communication.

Formal Communication

Traditional communication methods have relied upon the 'formal route'. Formal channels of communication are methods and forms of communication that are recognised and approved by employers and employee representatives.

These formal channels will include regular staff meetings, Quality Circles, Staff Appraisal interviews and normal line management-staff communication.

At a basic minimum, and under Taylorian style systems, formal channels are relied upon to ensure that orders or instructions are carried out. But this ignores the fact that formal channels can also be used for two way information flow. Communication should be up as well as down the hierarchy. The development of this two way path has been encouraged by those firms who are aware of the importance of communication in motivation and in the role of grass roots workers in spotting and solving problems as well as assisting companies remain market orientated. If this upward vertical communication occurs, those that understand the problem, can help solve the problem.

Informal Communication

But as well as the formal methods of communication all businesses have informal communication networks that are not controlled by senior management. People talk, they pass information on, they have colleagues that they trust and that they discuss issues with. All of this leads to informal passing of information.

Informal channels can both help and hinder formal communication, but one definite advantage of informal communication is that, when used it can by-pass layers of hierarchy.

Informal communication can hinder formal communication because, information that is transmitted through informal channels has a greater chance of becoming distorted. (Just think about the game Chinese whispers).

Surprisingly, the grapevine can be acknowledged by management and actively approved of. For example, managers may start a rumour, and wait to see how the workers react, and then make changes based on the reaction of employees. This though is unlikely to happen in

firms with authoritarian management structures, where informal communication can be virtually outlawed.

All of these communication methods will allow the passing of information. And remember we are not just talking about telling people what they need to know, or giving orders, we are talking about developing ideas and ensuring that these ideas are acted upon. Communication can be easily linked to team working, or quality circles. These groups allow the pooling of ideas so that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts.

Research has shown that effective communication requires both formal and informal channels. Formal statements can be supported by informal explanations.

Vertical and lateral communication.

The combination of vertical and lateral communication is what makes up an effective communication network. Downwards vertical communication, from manager to subordinate and so on, is used to tell employees about decisions that have been made. It sounds like giving orders, but within the method we can see that it has definite functions beyond this. These advantages of formal vertical communication are given below.

- It allows decisions made by managers to be carried out by subordinates i.e. giving orders
- Ensures that control from the centre is strong and that actions are co-ordinated and consistent
- Reduces conflicts, power struggles, empire building

The combination of the above will increase efficiency, and therefore increase profitability.

The flow of information upwards, that is backwards vertical, also has an important role to play in effective decision making. This is because it:

- Helps managers to understand employees views and concerns, whether in regard to internal factors or external issues
- It can alert managers to potential problems, such as discontentment with decisions implemented, or dissatisfaction of customers
- It has an important role in motivation (Herzberg and Maslow).

Lateral communication takes place when people at the same level in an organisation pass information. This is type of communication is essential as it lets different departments understand the objectives, aims and requirements of other departments. If we look at a typical traditional hierarchy where direct lateral communication is not possible, there may be many layers of hierarchy for communication between departments to pass through, and remember in today's multinational those that need to talk may not be on the same continent let alone in the same building.

In the past, a lack of understanding about what different sectors of a business are trying to achieve, has led to over or underproduction, lack of required manpower or skills, or shortages of capital. Lateral communication tries to overcome these problems.

Communication Networks

A successful business should as far as possible use a variety of types of communication net-

work. The way these communication networks pass information can be pictured if we see them as different shapes, as indicated by their names. These networks (with the exception of 'the chain') are all very different from the traditional hierarchical organisational structures which still found in many unreformed public sector bodies. Each network has been designed with one overall objective; to improve communication.

Different Communication Networks.

The circle.

In this network departments and individuals can only communicate with the two others adjacent to them in the circle. This type of communication can occur between middle managers from different departments. But it can be slow or disorganised because of lack of co-ordination.

The chain.

Within the chain network one person passes information on to others who then pass it on. This is the formal approach. The main advantage is that there is a leader, a co-ordinator at the top of the network who can oversee communications downwards. The main problem is the isolation felt by those at the bottom.

The wheel.

In the wheel network there is a person, or group, or department, that occupies a central position, the spoke of the wheel.. This is a good problem solving network, with lots of potential input to a central co-ordinator.

All connected or all channel network.

This network is best used in small groups, and often used to solve complex problems. Communication between members takes advantage of

information technology based communication systems, such as video conferencing and e-mail.

Why do many businesses find it so difficult to achieve effective communication?

With all these methods of communication available, why is it that communication can fail in its objectives?

There are a number of reasons for this failure, which include:

Attitudes. This applies to managers and staff. We have seen that in the Hawthorne experiments staff can react with hostility to managers trying to break down traditional barriers. Managers can be equally as much to blame. McGregor's Theory X managers would find it difficult to believe that staff are able to provide worthwhile feedback.

Failure of intermediaries. Communication can depend upon the messenger. This problem arises with all types of vertical communication. The messenger, often a middle manager, may have his own priorities or beliefs or objectives that do not tally with the message he is supposed to convey. The message is therefore distorted, intentionally or otherwise.

Lack of common language or sense of purpose. Here we are talking about the basis of communication, understanding. This problem can arise because of jargon or technical issues, but more importantly results from beliefs held about the objectives of work. Short term issues may dominate many workers lives,. Why then should they concern themselves with medium to long term plans, new management philosophies, or matters that they have no wish to understand?

Different personal goals or ambitions. Younger employees may push for change, whilst those set in their ways, at whatever level, want to stick with what they understand. The comfort zone is seen by many managers as the pinnacle of ambition, and managers may resist attempts to shift the ground from beneath them.

Do firms need good communication systems?

Below are given some of the main arguments against fully involving employees in communication systems.

Decision making can be counter productive. Mayo, with his Hawthorne experiments demonstrated that in many cases communication that involves worker participation in decision making can be counter productive, slowing down processes, creating a sense of suspicion and reducing productivity.

Communication is expensive, in both management time and in setting up systems.

Communication has to be backed up by guarantees, such as jobs for life schemes, these can be expensive.

Communication results in increased expectations Workers expect more involvement, what was a motivating factor can become a Hygiene factor.

What if the information is bad news, e.g. redundancies, should workers be told? Will this not lead to de-motivation?

Are the workers likely to benefit from involvement in communication? What if they are unskilled, and low paid? What will be the

point of communicating, if Herzberg's Hygiene Factors are not in place?

All of the above can be used to question the effectiveness of communication, and the value for money it provides.

Notes