

[55-310] Communication in an environment of continual change and transition

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"What increases morale is when you include people in the communication. What really destroys morale is when you start to exclude people. Bring them in; tell them you're looking at changes; you're not definite but you think the changes are going to be negative and there's going to be cost-cutting but you don't know how much. Bring them with you during this time. Human beings don't handle exclusion. They handle bad news fine." — Dr TJ Larkin

Changing times, market downturns, potential organisational restructures and the challenges that come from managing and communicating with a multi-generational and culturally diverse workforce, make the need for an effective employee communication strategy even greater than before. Change can be challenging. Expecting employees to change their behaviour or adopt new work methods and/or adapt to changes in technology is, in many cases, a big ask. Long-held habits are not easy to change.

Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC) have produced the following graphic (see figure 1) showing the various emotions and behaviours that employees may experience as they learn about a change to their job or their workplace and then come to terms with the potential impact on their job and/or personal life.

It is these emotions that organisations often ignore or forget when they want to introduce a change. William Bridgesⁱ, an internationally recognised authority on managing change in the workplace, says: "Change and transition are different, and both are necessary for any significant change to work." Bridges explains that the term "change" represents "a shift in the externals of any situation" and might include, for instance, a new boss, setting up a new program, the death of a relative, moving to a new city, a promotion, etc. By contrast, he says that "transition is the mental and emotional transformation that people must undergo to relinquish old arrangements and embrace new ones. Transition has three phases:

1. an Ending
2. a disorienting sort of 'nowhere' called The Neutral Zone, and
3. a new Beginning".

If people do not deal with each of these phases, Bridges believes that the change will be "just a rearrangement of the furniture" and will not have worked.

Figure 1: The Emotional Spiral of Change

The Emotional Spiral of Change

Source: © Davidson Trahaire Corpsych I

When working with organisations to assist them to implement change and manage the transition process, Julie Sim, the State Manager (Qld) at Davidson Trahaire Corpsych says that she works with individual employees as well as managers to help them express their concerns and anxieties about changes. She assists them to move from a potentially negative situation to one where they can find a way to accept the changes or discover options that are appropriate for themselves and their future careers. With the managers and senior leaders, the focus is on encouraging them to listen to staff and to recognise that the transition phase will be a different experience for different people and that some will need help to move forward.

Bridges suggests that there are three simple questions which will help leaders manage the transition. These are:

- "Who has to let go of what for this to be successful?"

- For this to happen, what has to end?
- What is it time for people to let go of?"

Within any organisation managing the change process can be a challenge. Organisations operating on a 24/7 basis, which are customer/client dependent (eg hospitals, hotels and airlines), may find the process even more daunting. These organisations need to keep staff informed, not only about organisational matters, but also about issues such as health and safety, changes to procedures and unexpected events. In addition, staff need to be educated in new procedures such as responding to a terrorist alert or a health-related issue such as the recent Avian Bird Flu scare. Often, the biggest challenge to implementing change is an organisation's legacy of change initiatives and employee's past experiences.

One organisation that has been able to create a "fresh start" while learning from past experiences is the Sydney Hilton Hotel. It re-opened three years ago after a major re-build and refurbishment program. Most of the current 580 team members are all new to the hotel. Work patterns vary according to the department in which a team member works. Some team members work shifts and others work full time, with established working hours. A number of "casuals" work on an as-needed basis, for instance, for specific events and functions.

The challenge for managers and executives in this type of environment is to ensure that:

- all team members are familiar with what is happening within the hotel
- information about special events and guests is communicated to all relevant team members
- issues which have arisen that impact on guest service are communicated and addressed by relevant team members
- all team members are informed about potential health, safety and security matters, and
- changes to procedures, such as fire drills, etc, are explained and tested with team members.

Working in hospitality requires team members to be able to cope with a constantly changing environment. Generally, these changes are expected as part of the job, however, the Hilton management team understands that there will be times when a significant change may be harder to adopt by some people, and that their transition to acceptance may take some time. The hotel's organisational communication processes have been designed to address most of these eventualities. These were introduced prior to the hotel re-opening.

There is significant focus on face-to-face communication in teams and this occurs on a regular basis. Each day, the general manager conducts a briefing session which is attended by all directors and heads of departments. The briefing sessions cover topics such as:

- events for the next 24 hours.
- guests and VIPs in the hotel
- special matters, such as guest feedback
- training, and
- health, safety and security issues.

Senior managers and heads of department are expected to talk to their teams as soon as possible after this briefing session. In addition, an email is distributed to all team members each day. All departmental heads are expected to contribute to this. For example, human resources will include information about payroll matters, training, team member birthdays and other significant events. To ensure that all team members have access to this information, four personal computers (PCs) are available to all team members in their "Knowledge Room" (the Knowledge Room is a specially designated retreat for team members, where they can relax, read emails, undertake study, etc) as well as in the Team Restaurant. Team members can access these PCs for both personal and business use.

In addition to these daily briefing sessions, there are monthly and quarterly meetings as well as newsletters and notices on boards. For more urgent communications (for example, for team members who may need to be called in to work at short notice) there is a text messaging system.

Each quarter, the Hilton runs what they call a “huddle”. This is a themed business/social event (held at 7.30 am, 12.00 pm and 3.30 pm). A meal is provided and all team members are invited to attend. There is a briefing from directors and the hotel manager about changes to policies and procedures, information about what is happening in the hotel as well as how the hotel is travelling towards achieving business goals. They try to make it a fun event and to date they have over 80% of team members attending each quarter.

Where there are significant changes to be briefed or there is a crisis situation that needs to be addressed, each director is allocated to a specific department to brief managers face-to-face, ensuring that information is delivered accurately and completely. Managers will then conduct their own staff briefings. The human resources director, Mirela Lane, says that they do this so that they can understand the concerns of team members and that this helps them to “keep their finger on the pulse”. While they do not specifically talk about their strategy to manage the transition phase of an organisational or procedural change, it would appear to be inherent in the way that they talk with and listen to staff on a daily basis. There are opportunities for team leaders to ask questions, identify concerns, observe team members and discuss change-related issues at their team meetings.

Lane indicated that their communication strategy has had to take into consideration the needs of the business as well as the different generations of staff within the hotel who respond to different types of communication. For example, the events department has recently invested in a communication tool that will allow them to send group text messages inviting staff to bid for additional shifts. She says that Gen X and Y team members have responded very positively to this use of technology. Just recently this system (group texting) was one of a number of communication processes that were used in an “emergency situation” where team leaders and other key players were needed in the hotel at very short notice.

As a precautionary measure, in early 2008 the hotel had to be evacuated because there was a fire in an adjacent building. It was 6.30 am and pouring with rain. In consultation with the fire authorities the decision was made to evacuate the hotel. The hotel was 90% full and additional guests were arriving for breakfast functions and other events planned for the remainder of the day. The emergency evacuation procedure was enacted and the entire hotel was evacuated within 20 minutes with all available team members on hand to provide help and support to guests, as well as refreshments at the evacuation sites. The pre-established communication strategy went into top gear with managers and staff members assigned to assist guests on their return to the hotel and to provide information on the situation and why the hotel had to be evacuated. Guests with special concerns were identified and given additional attention by management.

So as to understand what worked well in this situation, and identify opportunities for improvement or further action, a de-briefing session followed by departmental feedback sessions was conducted by the executive team. At 9 am the team were briefed on the emergency and advised of the evacuation process as well as issues which had arisen. They were asked to forward all feedback to their respective manager. Guest feedback was included in these communications, the majority of which was positive and recognised the need for the evacuation.

The experience of the Hilton Hotel would suggest that the organisation is most likely to be better equipped to respond to a crisis or an emergency situation where there is a strong foundation of regular communication, staff members “trust” the organisation and what it communicates to them, communication processes are tested and staff know exactly what to do in a situation and why they are doing it.

Situations that may have an impact on the employment of staff require the same solid communication methods used when handling incidents. Such communications can also be used to manage significant organisational change and related issues that may arise.

Footnotes

ⁱ William Bridges on Managing Transitions — Interview with Management Consulting News
www.managementconsultingnews.com/interviews/bridges_interview.php