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# Communicating Effectively with Employees

Poor communication is a common problem in many workplaces. Managers sometimes become so focused on meeting deadlines and demands that they fail to share vital information with employees, ignore input, or choose ineffective channels for conveying key messages. As experienced managers know, this can result in costly mistakes, low morale, and even turnover.

When our company recently surveyed executives about the biggest mistakes they have made as supervisors, the most frequent answer was lack of communication. How can you improve your relationships with employees and ensure your messages are achieving their intended results? Here are a few strategies.

## Keep Everyone Informed

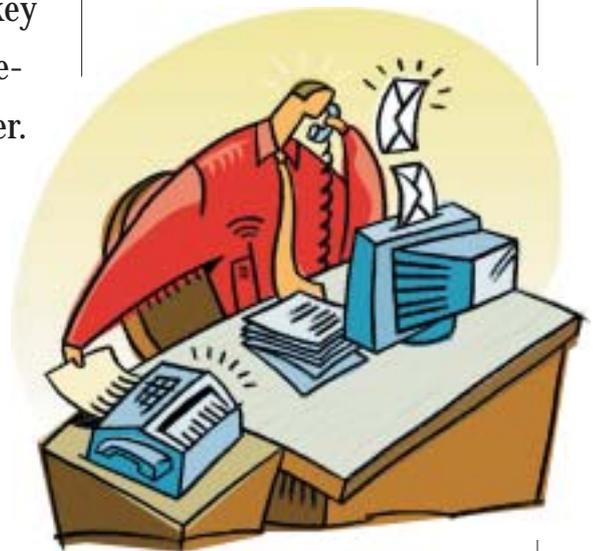
Effective communication can only happen when there is a free exchange of information. While you might not be able to share all of the details about business decisions or activities, you should strive to keep accounting staff updated on critical matters. For instance, if your company is in the process of selecting a new external auditor, let employees know. You don't need to explain

why your organization is hiring a different firm, but people should be aware of the upcoming change so they can begin to prepare for it. Keeping your staff in the loop also prevents rumors from starting. Rather than draw their own conclusions, your team will understand why there's an increased number of visitors to the department.

## Select the Right Communication Method

The way you choose to convey information can make all the difference. E-mail is a popular form of communication, but it's not ideal in many circumstances. When giving employees news that directly affects

their work—such as the appointment of a new supervisor or a change in department protocol—it's best to convey the message in person. This will give you the opportunity to clarify complex or sensitive



issues and answer questions. You can then follow up the interaction with an e-mail or memo reiterating key points.

Weekly staff meetings are a useful way to promote open communication with employees, but be cautious about relying too heavily on these discussions as a means to stay up to date on department activities. While some people may readily speak up

during these meetings, others may prefer to share their comments individually. Also, don't hold weekly meetings out of routine; make sure there is always a clear need to gather so the time is productive.

### **Be Consistent**

To be an excellent communicator, your words should match your actions. If you ask employees for their suggestions as to the accounting skills your team requires in the near term, for example, you must give serious consideration to the input received. You don't have to adhere to every recommendation, but you should follow through on the best ideas. Otherwise, staff members may believe their opinions were never truly considered.

Also make sure you communicate performance standards consistently. A project completed behind schedule shouldn't warrant a public reprimand for one team and be forgivable for another group. Employees need a clear idea of your expectations and should know you will apply your standards in a fair and predictable manner.

### **Make Sure They "Get It"**

Demonstrating patience is another key element of effective communication, but it can be easier said than done. When you are interacting with a staff member who doesn't seem to comprehend a new SEC regulation, try to work together toward a better understanding of the issue. What may seem obvious to you might not be so obvious to the person with whom you are speaking. Consider other ways of explaining the information, such as using charts or specific examples. The extra effort you make up front clarifying an issue can save you valuable time

later by preventing mistakes and misunderstandings.

### **Pay Attention to Body Language**

Nonverbal cues also play a large role in the messages you send to your accounting team. Relax, speak in an even tone, and stand upright when addressing staff. When you look comfortable, your employees can focus on what you have to say and not on your emotional state.

### **Listen**

Finally, recognize that communication is a two-way street. Employees want to be heard by their supervisors, so take the time to listen. Enter every discussion with an open mind. The more receptive you are to new ideas and suggestions, the more readily your staff will offer them. These are also opportunities to find out about your employees' career goals, what they think needs to be improved within the company, or situations that may be affecting their job performance. When people request a chance to speak with you, give them as much of your time as possible, and stay completely engaged in the conversation.

Improving your communication with employees can help you build stronger and more productive relationships. Keep your team informed, and show a genuine interest in what they have to say in return. You will create the type of work environment that brings out the best in your accounting staff and encourages them to remain with your organization. ■

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