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10 WAYS TO CREATE A CULTURE OF OPEN COMMUNICATION

Creating a culture of open communication can be one of the best ways to inspire excellent performance, improve employee morale, and foster a warmer corporate culture, says Alexander Tuff '03.
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It was a silly argument with my wife about leaving dirty dishes in the sink that my 9-year-old son, Oliver, overheard. I was satisfied with my side, but when I put Oliver to bed that night, he rehashed the heated exchange, point by point, explaining how I didn't see things from my wife's perspective.

He explained how my wife's frustration had been growing for months and no matter how many times she told me to clean up, I never did. Taking a step back, I could see that the feedback my son was giving me was absolutely right and I needed to change my ways (still a work in progress) and improve the way I listen and communicate with my wife on matters that are of concern to her. While our kitchen conversation was of little consequence, companies around the world can face major setbacks when they don't have standard processes and channels in place for employees to give and receive feedback.

Creating a culture of open communication can be one of the best ways to inspire excellent performance, improve employee morale, and foster a warmer corporate culture. Here are 10 simple ways to integrate feedback into your company.

1. Around-the-Clock Clear Communication Channels

Ask your direct reports how you are doing as a manager and what they like — and don't like. In the meantime, stay vigilant about continuously reinforcing their strengths and flagging weaknesses. Prompt feedback means that issues are resolved immediately. Avoid e-mail: messages can be misunderstood, misguided, or missed altogether. Communicate in person or, if necessary, over the phone.

2. Weekly One-on-One Meetings

Keep a standing date with each direct report. These informal chats will allow concerns to be addressed without interrupting the rest of your week. Don't stand your date up: you'll be seen as inaccessible or direct reports will feel like less of a priority, which can muddy the feedback process.

3. Monthly or Quarterly Staff Meetings

This is a chance to share key information like board decisions and new initiatives with all employees. Time these meetings when you have information to share, such as several days after a board meeting. Be sure to make the gatherings enjoyable. For example, you might begin with a relevant story or by recognizing an employee's recent accomplishment. Boredom or bossiness will alienate your audience. Allow time for a Q&A session. By the end of each meeting, your team should be in-the-know and have their key concerns or questions addressed.

4. Annual Reviews

These should be formal one-on-one sit-downs, with consistent standards measuring each employee's performance. If your organization has had poor feedback strategies in the past, be prepared for some resistance on annual reviews — and reassure staff members that the goal is positive outcomes, not negative reprimands. I have experienced this firsthand when a teary-eyed employee asked to discontinue annual reviews because they made everyone nervous, angry, or sad. Turning that around by opening up more ongoing channels for employee feedback means that everyone will know where they stand before annual reviews take place, making the process a less anxious experience for everyone.

5. Anonymous Surveys

Surveys make it possible to regularly assess your firm's culture and employees' overall happiness. I also use them to measure employee engagement, and I share results and trends with the entire organization. Anonymity is important — employees need to feel comfortable speaking their minds — as is closing the loop: you should be prepared to respond to employees' feedback. Our company Intranet allows surveys and voting to be completely transparent, which helps create a culture of trust while driving home the message that everyone is invited to identify opportunities for improvement.

6. 360-Degree Reviews

In March, I underwent a 360-degree review and realized that my own progress as a leader was hampered because I was not addressing the most critical opportunities for growth. It was a bit painful — as 360-degree reviews can be — but showed me how to correct my course. A licensed professional should conduct 360-degree reviews, discuss feedback, and offer positive advice for improvement.

7. Post-Mortem Debriefs

These are meetings focused on internal assessment of major projects or deals — both what was successful and what can be done better the next time around. These check-ins allow the firm to capture key learnings for the next big deal or project and to turn challenging issues into opportunities for improvement. Remember to accentuate the good along with the bad.

8. Informal Social Outings

Whether it's a trip to the local bowling alley or a picnic lunch in Central Park, get-togethers outside the office are a chance to loosen up. To avoid getting too informal, lay off the booze.

9. State-of-the-Union E-mail Communications

Every so often, say once a quarter, I send an e-mail to all staff members on the strategic direction of the organization or company values. These messages are an important way to keep everyone at the firm in touch with the bigger picture beyond individual functions or teams.

10. Employee Exit Interviews

Regardless of your organization's size, make sure that departing employees are interviewed about their experiences and reasons for leaving. People are often very open in these interviews, which provide incredibly valuable feedback. Take employees' comments seriously and ask your HR team to present trends and takeaways from exit interviews to management annually so that actions can be taken to help retain valuable employees and increase overall morale.

Creating a culture of open communication takes work, like any relationship, and is easily overlooked when business is humming along. Any one of these tools is a start and is well worth the effort to drive a company to new levels of productivity and employee happiness.

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