

AN EXECUTIVE'S NEW BEST FRIEND: The BLOG

It's a problem in many organizations. Executives are seen as being out of touch, disconnected from their employees and just "not getting it." Data supports that there is communication disconnect between employees and executives. A study conducted by Tower Perrin suggests that only 36% of employees believe that senior executives communicate openly and honestly. The same study found that just 44% of employees believe that senior executives try to be visible and accessible.

A Hay Group study confirmed that one of the most important predictors of employee commitment and loyalty is the connection between the employee and the big picture. Employees who don't understand the big picture are more inclined to leave. And where do employees want to obtain this big picture information? From executives – who are seen as the most credible and knowledgeable information sources?

A disconnect in communication between those at the top and those whom they lead significantly erodes trust and confidence in the senior management. And these factors have a direct impact on engagement, which in turn directly impacts results. In 2008, Blessing White found that while fully 80% of employees who were engaged trusted their senior management, only 17% of disengaged employees trusted their senior management.

Numbers such as these suggest that executives are missing an opportunity to engage employees in their organizations. Survey, polls and questionnaires indicate that executive communication is falling significantly short of what employees need.

But how can executives best communicate to employees? How can a dozen or so key individuals meet the communication needs of thousands of employees? Quarterly newsletters or annual site visits simply don't do it. Town hall meetings might work in small organizations, but in larger organizations they happen too infrequently to ensure a free flow of information.

Traditionally we have believed that people want to "press the flesh." They want to see and connect with their executives in person. But another methodology is taking root in organizations that promises to transform executive-employee relationships – provided it is done right. The BLOG.

Blogging, when done effectively, can provide a forum for individuals to share views, be heard, send messages and receive feedback. It can provide an opportunity for connection and that elusive thing called communication.

While an increasing number of organizations have started using a blog as a form of internal communication, many are unfortunately doing it in a way that does little to increase the quality of communication within the organization. Blog posts, while purportedly coming from an executive, are often clearly written by someone in the communications department and used simply to present the

company line. Comments are screened and the whole thing has an aura of company propaganda. In such cases, it likely harms employee engagement more than it helps.

But there is hope. Case in point – I recently heard of one organization that appears to be getting it right. They have an executive blog and since instituting it (and supporting it with various employee meetings and newsletters), their employees' perception of senior management has risen by 20%. So, the key is not just having a blog, but doing it right. What does that mean? Four essential practices:

1. The executives must write the posts themselves. This is critical – but also hard. Those at the top frequently rely on communications specialists to write their messages. But that's not what employees want. They want to hear the real voice of the real executive. Communication is not a job that can be outsourced at all times. The organization I referred to admits this has been a struggle, but it is also a critical success factor. The role of the communications department is to insist it be done and also to check that nothing the executive has written will get the organization in trouble – a kind of communication safety net. But that is all.
2. All comments to the blog must be approved by someone within the organization – often this is a job for the communications department. However, unless the comment is directed towards an individual or in some way contravenes the company values, it should be approved. People will soon stop responding if negative comments are screened out. If you value authentic communication, then all critiques must be published provided they are written in a respectful manner.
3. Any comment that is not suitable for publication is forwarded (in confidence, without any indication of the author) to the senior executives. The communications department responds to the author and explains why the comment was not made public.
4. All members of the senior executive are expected to write a posting for the blog at regular intervals. By not restricting the blog to one individual, the executives have an opportunity to present a common front. In organizations where senior executives are seen more as functional heads than as a highly performing team, the structure of the blog can go a long way towards developing more favourable perceptions of the quality of teamwork at the top.

A senior executive blog can significantly improve the quality of communication between senior management and employees – but only if done right. Like much of the work we do, it requires some hard work and an element of risk. But surely the prize of an engaged workforce is worth it?

This article was written by Dr. Rosie Steeves, Principal with The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., a Vancouver based leadership consulting company. We are interested in hearing from our readers. E-mail your questions, comments and ideas to rosie@refineryleadership.com.

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