

the Journal

January/February 2008

Lawrence Ragan Communications
Journal of Employee Communication Management



Make the most of what you have

eBay communicators have built an internal comms empire—and they're sharing their tips **13**

You've got mail

AOL layoff communication was less than expert, but could they have done any better? **3**

Saving face

It seems lately that public relations needs better PR **7**

Green treatment

Your external audience thinks CSR is great, but you've got to convince your employees, too **20**

A note to the C-suite

It's time for a communication change, and it starts at the top **26**



By **Ron Shewchuk**

Ron Shewchuk is an associate with Longview Communications, a consulting firm specializing in corporate and financial communications. He is the author of *Writing and Editing the Internal Publication: Delivering Employee Communications with Impact, Integrity and Style*, and the blog *For Your Approval* at <http://ronshewchuk.blogs.com>. Ron can be reached at 604.694.6037 or rshewchuk@longviewcomms.ca.

DEAR CEO: A LETTER ABOUT EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

Hey, CEO! Yes, I mean you. It's time to change the way you communicate with employees. Here's how.

If this works the way I hope it does, someone photocopied this article and put it on your desk. It will take you about 10 minutes to read. It could change your life. —Ron

Dear CEO: I'm writing this because there are some really important things you need to know about communicating with employees. Things that will change the way you communicate. Maybe even how you lead.

This is the conversation your internal communications team wants to have with you, but work gets in the way. And, I can tell you, some of them are also busy rolling their eyes and griping that senior leaders like you “just don't get it” when it comes to internal communication.

That's why I'm doing you (and them) a favor by sharing some unvarnished truths about communicating with employees. A lot of companies say, “Our employees are our most important asset.” There are two problems with that. One is that employees are actually people, not assets. The second is that the statement is seldom reflected in the CEO's calendar or the annual budget for training, education and the like. That's not to say the sentiment isn't real, but too often more immediate (or just plain sexier) priorities crowd out the time you might devote to talking to the people who make your business go. >

You and I both know you can do better. I know about your company's drive to improve employee engagement; every company has one. I also know you and your fellow executives are worried about holding onto, and attracting, good people. Heck, it seems like half of the current employee population is approaching retirement and a whole new generation is joining the workforce. It's clear that you have to get more in touch with all the new employees who are coming into your company, and find new ways to connect with them.

So it's time to change your approach to internal communication. Here's how.

1 Think about communication as you're making business decisions—not after the fact.

Here's the way it currently works: An executive decision is made, and then your leadership team and your employee communications people are told to let everyone know what's been decided. Instead, you need to consider how you're going to engage employees as part of your decision-making process. Here's an example: Say you decide you're going to change something in your manufacturing process that's going to save money and improve product quality. A no-brainer, right? Not necessarily. If that process change is going to mean major changes for employees who are already sick of change, they might not lend their support. What looked like a simple decision ends up being executed badly. Productivity goes down, no money is saved, quality is compromised, customers are unhappy and disgruntled employees start to jump ship—all because you didn't think of how the original decision might be perceived by employees. So, from

now on, think about how you're going to engage employees before you make your next business decision. You'll make better decisions. You'll be able to communicate those decisions more effectively. Employee uptake will be better. You'll be perceived as a stronger leader. Ultimately, you'll have employees who are more committed and engaged.

2 Involve your communications team much earlier than you do now.

This relates directly to the point above. If you think communication is valuable now, just think of how much more leverage you'll be able to get by enabling your communications team to do more than take orders and fight fires. They can act as a proxy for employees who do not otherwise have a voice, giving you a chance to learn how people on the front lines are likely to respond to your decisions. Make your senior employee communications person an insider, and you will be a better-informed leader. And if you really want to be more strategic about internal communication, have your senior communicator report directly to you. It's wrong for them to report to HR or anywhere else but the CEO.

3 Recognize that today's employees don't necessarily share your values.

You and your fellow baby boomer CEOs have a different work ethic, a different set of priorities, a different idea of what a successful career looks like and a different way of communicating. If you communicate as if all employees think just like you, you risk alienating and further disengaging your work force. Which leads me to point No. 4.

4 Understand what your employees are thinking.

Enlist your communications staff to help you listen to your employees and find out how they perceive your company. Then use what you've learned to inform your decisions and how you communicate them. The worst way to do this is every two years in some kind of a big omnibus survey. These days, that's not enough. Quickie employee polls, readership surveys and small focus groups will give you more timely and useful information. And be sure to put what you learn to use. Show that you've listened, and that you're responding to employee concerns, and you'll earn their trust.

5 Start a real conversation with your employees.

One of the easiest ways to increase engagement is to have a conversation with employees about the future of your company. Today's workers share a violent distaste for hierarchy, coupled with a need to feel as if their opinion matters. Some of the world's biggest organizations are talking with their employees online using internal Web sites called weblogs or blogs. Get ahead of the curve now and start experimenting with this powerful new technology. In the meantime, get out there and talk with people face to face.

6 For goodness sake, stop blocking the Internet!

People are expected to take their jobs home with them, getting work done on nights and weekends; in return, they want to bring some of their personal life to work. That means being able to have reasonably unfettered access to the Web so they can – yes, I'm saying it – do a bit of online shopping and read >

their favorite Web sites. There are security and productivity issues, but they can be resolved. Severely limiting Internet access is not the answer because it inhibits employee engagement. Open access to information invites involvement, breeds innovation and inspires commitment.

7 Improve day-to-day communication with your direct reports.

You don't have time to go around and talk with everyone. But you should be visible and you do have the power to set the tone for your entire organization. Like it or not, a company's culture and reputation are largely defined by the actions and the words of the CEO. The way to make the biggest impact is to model the right behavior with your own immediate team. The trick here is to make sure that when a decision is made, everyone has the same story line and knows it's their responsibility to get the message out to their own teams.

8 Don't be reluctant to tell the whole truth.

It's too easy to fall prey to the Tyranny of the Positive. I know you can't bear to communicate anything in negative terms. It's part of your style. But it can get in the way of good communication. People talk. Most of them know what's going on before it's officially announced. So when you do communicate about a big problem or a burning issue, don't massage the messages into an unrecognizable blob of mushy, positive verbiage. If you don't talk frankly and openly about what everyone knows already, you lose credibility—and the next time you have really positive news to talk about, employees won't buy that, either.

9 Finally, and perhaps most importantly, speak plain English with employees.

The language you may speak in the boardroom, or with your bankers and lawyers, may be truthful but it's incomprehensible to most employees. Forget the jargon. You're not moving toward a more proactive approach to operationalizing change, you want to do a better job of planning things in advance. You don't strike an initiative to address current challenges, you do something to solve a problem. Some CEOs think that plain language is too colloquial, that there's something unsophisticated about short words and sentences. But consider this old rhyme: "Be careful with the words you say, to make them short and sweet/You never know, from day to day, which ones you'll have to eat."

That's enough words from me for now. Thanks for reading this letter. I have one more thing to ask of you. Please talk with your communications team about the changes I've suggested and figure out if any of them would work for you. Even if none of them do, I'm happy to have prompted the conversation.

Sincerely yours,

