a guide to

Feedback Mechanisms

by Juliet Earp
Achieving dialogue with staff is the gold standard of internal communications and can play a vital role in the competitiveness of organisations. Introducing and developing effective feedback channels harnesses this dialogue and contributes to employee engagement.

Ensuring feedback mechanisms are in place enables leaders and communicators to measure the pulse of employee opinion. Do employees understand the company strategy and complement it with how they work?

In turn, do senior managers understand the realities of the frontline and what is possible?

Ideally feedback is a constant dialogue incorporating surveys, focus groups, communications champions, lunches with senior managers, telephone hotlines, email addresses and/or social media.

Whether and how to incorporate feedback can be challenging particularly if questioning the way things are done is not culturally accepted in organisations.

Nevertheless research increasingly shows that employees expect feedback and social media channels, particularly those entering the workforce after school or graduation.

“New technologies affect how people view their organisational culture. People with access to new technologies are more likely to characterise their organisations as having a culture of mutual trust and loyalty, and are more likely to trust their colleagues.” (The Work Foundation, 2009, p9)

Feedback also enables organisations to be agile, and respond quickly to emerging issues. It can often help to highlight problems within the organisation before they affect its external reputation.

Introduction

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Consider how receptive leaders and managers are to receiving positive and negative feedback and whether they will act upon it. If there is no appetite for this you may only succeed in dashing workforce morale.

Evaluate how staff feel about current feedback channels. Look at recent staff surveys, speak to staff or run a short online poll. In your assessment consider what is and isn’t working and what staff would like more of.

Ask senior leaders about their views on feedback and their interest in developing it. Do they prefer the status quo or are they keen to build on what is already there. What support do they need to meet the demands of feedback? Is there a champion among the senior leadership team who would help pilot new ways of working?

Research industry case-studies to support the argument for feedback channels. Do not underestimate the power of the competition.

In some cultures consulting or asking permission to set up feedback channels can be the death knell of the project. Instead consider an experimental approach and set up a small pilot to provide the evidence for change or the sense that ‘we already do this round here’ as an alternative way to get things moving.

Social media is in vogue. However before considering the technology consider the readiness of your staff. Look at how they currently use social media and encourage or introduce technologies to complement this. This means that the channels will be used and can be built upon. There are many free social media tools (Yammer, Digg) that can be used straight away rather than building an expensive bespoke system as your starting point.

There are a huge variety of feedback channels available including:
- Staff meetings (1:1s, team meetings, town halls, away days and lunch with senior leaders)
- Dedicated email addresses and hotlines
- Social media including forums, ratings and reviews, wikis, social networking sites, blogs, podcasts and tagging.

Any of these can be led by line managers, senior leaders or staff members. The key to their success is how the feedback is considered and leads to change.

Collect feedback intelligently. For example, line managers should be provided with clear guidelines on the areas for feedback and timelines met for reporting back on actions taken as a result.

Link feedback to senior managers who can address the issues, make any change and complete the dialogue with staff.
Quirke (2008) is clear about the importance of feedback as the fourth step in good organisational communication after providing content, creating context and having conversations.

Li and Bernoff (2008) build the case for feedback using social media. They also recommend that the tools used meet employees where they are, and build from there rather than introducing sophisticated systems which are likely to remain unused.

Communicators wishing to encourage a culture of positive and negative feedback will find Tourish and Robson’s studies interesting. Without a healthy amount of negative feedback it is easy to cultivate an ivory tower effect where senior managers are out of touch with reality at the frontline. Performance is affected and the business becomes uncompetitive (Tourish, 2005).

Enron and Marks and Spencer in the late 1990s (Tourish 2005) are examples often quoted. In these organisations, bad news was frowned upon. This culture is easy to understand as people are particularly sensitive to criticism (Tourish and Robson 2003) and do not encourage it.

Tourish and Robson (2006) also highlight Nutt’s study of organisational decision-making which discovered that half of all decisions failed. This was because managers used power rather than persuasion. The success of decisions increased when managers explained the need for action, set objectives, sourced key people to participate and did not restrict the search for solutions. This complements much of the thinking around employee engagement (MacLeod and Clark, Quirke, and Smythe) which highlights the importance of upward feedback and employee participation in decisions.

Tourish (2005) highlights the perversity of expecting staff to exhibit commitment to company strategies without the opportunity to discuss and debate them like their senior managers. The lack of upward feedback is a ‘silent killer’ of organisational strategy as disparate groups create their own story and dilute the sense of common organisational purpose (Tourish and Robson 2006, p13).

Tourish (2005) suggests that as uncertainty and complexity increase, the need for upward feedback is likely to become more important and therefore is a natural extension to ensuring that employees are up to date with company news.
Reading list

Li C. and Bernoff J. (2008)
Groundswell, winning in a world transformed by social technologies
Harvard Business Press

Sensemaking and Distortion of Critical Upward Communication in Organisation

Critical Upward Communication: Ten Commandments for Improving Strategy and Decision Making

Ruck, K. (2010)
Exploring Internal Communications
Pearson Education Limited

Critical Upward Feedback in Organisations: Processes, Problems and Implications for Communication Management

Quirke, B. (2008)
Making the Connections, Using Internal Communication to Turn Strategy into Action, 2nd Edition
Gower

MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2010)
Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance Through Employee Engagement

Smythe, J. (2007)
The CEO: Chief Engagement Officer, Turning Hierarchy Upside Down to Drive Performance
Gower

The Work Place Foundation (2009)