Engaging employees using two-way communication

“Knowledge is power” goes the old adage, and this is especially true in the workplace. Leaders often receive information before their staff. They also control what gets filtered down and how. A good leader though, is not merely someone who has the “inside scoop,” but someone who uses what they know to inspire and motivate a team towards success.

Listening to your team is equally important as it’s a great chance to tap into the knowledge, ideas and feedback they bring to the table. It can be easy to fall into the trap of excluding information when it comes to relating to staff, but creating a two-way communication path builds community, innovation and trust within your team. Read on to learn about how you can improve the flow of communication between you and your employees and put your team on the fast track.

Get in the game

As a leader, you are on a team working towards a mandate, and each member is important to meeting your shared goals. Like a sports coach, you need to communicate your strategy out to your team, making sure they know the game plan when they hit the field. And you need to listen to your team to know their strengths and weaknesses in order to create your strongest strategy and ensure your team’s success. Sharing important information and listening to ideas will not only help your staff stay on the same page, but will also inspire your team and actively show them that their contributions are valued. And when one of your players scores with a great idea or contribution, you’ll all be winners. Try to:

- **Brainstorm** – Good leaders value and use the skills of their employees and encourage innovation. Create a fun and “safe” space where team members can think outside the box and voice their ideas without fear of them being rejected or picked apart. Keep record of the ideas and go back to them later on your own or as a team to look at them critically and decide how to move forward.

- **Be an innovation advocate** – Do your employees come to you when they have a great idea? If not, that doesn’t mean they aren’t having them. Let your team know you value their ideas and want to know them. Make some time in your calendar when an employee asks to meet with you. If you are a leader within a large organization, set up an e-mail address for submitting new ideas and advertise on the intranet. Reward innovative thinking by recognizing employees’ contributions through the intranet, on workplace bulletin boards, in person and/or in a meeting in front of their peers.

- **Invent an event** – Create events that engage your employees in a way that is fun and informative. Is your organization going through a major change? Have a colleague or speaker come in who can speak to that change, having shared a similar experience and seen positive results. Is there a new initiative underway? Kick it off with a fun event that will communicate the philosophy behind the initiative and get your team excited to participate.

- **Update your status** – In the world of Facebook and Twitter, status updates have become an increasingly popular way to get your message across. Your team may not want to know what you ate for breakfast or that you had to wait in line for two hours at the movie theatre, but they would appreciate updates regarding milestones in their work or in an organizational change.

- **Newsletter** – The newsletter is a valuable tool in communicating out to the organization but it is meant to complement in-person communication, not replace it. Be proactive. Is there a new mandatory process or procedure? Talk to your team about it before they read it in the next month’s newsletter. If you don’t have all the answers yet, let them know that there will be a more extensive explanation coming their way and that you are available for questions and feedback.

Build a trust fund

Relationships are like chequing accounts. To make a withdrawal, you first need to make a deposit. If you expect your employees to trust and respect you when leading them through difficult times, whether downsizing, organizational change or an obstacle in a project, you need to have earned it first. Communicate openly and honestly with your employees on a regular basis, even when the news isn't positive. If your employees have been blindsided by bad news in the past, they will not trust you to be honest with them in the future. Don't think that by remaining silent your employees are assuming everything is fine.

Taking time out at the end of meetings to ask your employees if there are any concerns or questions can make a big difference to how your team feels about your leadership. Let them know that you are also available offline to field any concerns or questions they might have. Listen to your employees and give an open and honest response. If you don't have the answer let them know you will find out and get back to them. Take this opportunity to stop gossip in its tracks by letting your team air their concerns and receive a straight answer.

A good leader is a team player, and this requires both giving and receiving communication. Withholding or disregarding information from a team is like failing to pass the baton in relay race. Nobody wins. As a leader, motivate and inspire your team through two-way communication. Whether that is through informal communication, such as 'offline meetings' or formal communication like events or newsletters, the investment is worth the reward. You will earn trust and respect and create a strong and innovative team that work hard towards a shared goal.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact LifeWorks·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.