

Breaking the broken telephone

Companies must create effective information dissemination structures to ensure issues are taken directly to leadership

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The broken telephone — a childhood game that is very much a part of the modern business landscape and presents a very real threat. Inefficient communication prevents essential information from flowing up, down or through the organisation, leaving those on the frontlines without the support and management guidance that they sorely need.

According to the 2010 Towers Watson Communication ROI Study Report: *Capitalising on Effective Communication*, companies that had highly effective communication saw 47% higher total returns to

shareholders and were three times more likely to invest in leaders and employees. The Gallup 2013, *Engagement at Work* report found that organisations with engaged employees had 37% less absenteeism, 10% higher customer metrics and 21% higher productivity.

“Ensure that information flow from the most senior to the most junior roles happens within 24-36 hours,” says Dr Amanda Hamilton-Attwell, director of Business DNA. “The longer it takes for information to flow through the organisation, the more active the grapevine will become. I advise organisations to draw a map of the information network that shows how information runs through the organisation and

to hold regular meetings that show employees how important their roles are in the success of the business.”

It's not just from the top down. The enterprise must have systems in place that provide employees with open channels through which they can share vital information upwards to top level executives and management.

“The risk is that when we rise to a certain level within a business, over time we can start to slowly become removed from the bread and butter of any organisation — the client base,” says Khanyi Nzukuma, chief executive of Metropolitan Retail. “Those within a team who are client-facing, who interact with the clients every day, these are the people who

will have the insight and understanding into what drives these clients. To facilitate knowledge sharing, make the link between top management and staff more direct and build a cohesive leadership team that can lead by example.”

It's also worth creating a culture of transparency ensuring that all staff and stakeholders understand the roles they have to play and why they are of value. When employees know how they fit into the organisation's strategy, they are empowered to do more and give more, and this level of employee buy-in is enormously beneficial to the business.

“Organisations such as Skype and Wikipedia were built by highly

skilled, busy individuals who were willing to work for free because they believed in what they were doing,” says Estelle Nagel, head of PR for Gumtree South Africa. “If the employee can't understand what they are doing, they cannot believe in what they are doing and an important motivator is lost. Poor internal communication is one of the single most destructive elements.”

There is no definitive solution that will deliver a seamless internal communication strategy for every business; this has to be adapted to each organisation's specific needs and structure. Nagel recommends asking staff what's lacking in communication and to then tackle these issues directly: “You cannot just send a memo that says, ‘We are now going to openly communicate as an organisation,’” she adds.

“You need buy-in from the top. Management needs to believe in internal marketing or it won't have the legs to run the course,” says Dean McCoubrey, chief executive of MediaWeb. “Adopt a tone that is approachable, do some research and find out what the recipients want. One size does not fit all and individuals have their own preferred communication methods.”

A rich and dynamic internal communications strategy that values employee input, encourages transparency and clarity and ensures that the issues experienced by employees across all levels of the organisation is invaluable. And it will prevent the broken telephone and the grapevine from making an unwanted appearance.



Dr Amanda Hamilton-Attwell
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Khanyi Nzukuma