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# Communication, employee performance, go hand in hand

If your car requires a premium grade of gasoline, but you settle for low octane instead, chances are high your engine will hesitate, stall or exhibit other characteristics of rough performance out on the road.

In a work environment, too, a unit's performance will sputter and falter if it's devoid of high octane, high quality communications.

Study after study confirms the fact that productivity and employee commitment are highest in those work areas where people are kept fully and regularly informed.



While some of the information needs of employees are met through electronic or written communications, surveys show that employees place a greater value on face-to-face communication by a long shot, especially when it comes from the person they work for.

However, while the manager/supervisor is the #1 most preferred source of information, many employees are critical of the effectiveness with which their boss communicates with them. And this dissatisfaction frequently snowballs into lack of trust, mediocre effort, increased turnover and disengagement from the goals and objectives of the business.

The reality of the 21st century workplace is that communication is a lot more than a "nice thing to do." It's a powerful tool for competitive advantage. And those who prioritize it and do it well are far more likely to

succeed for themselves and for their business than those who don't.

The information which follows in this Guide contains tips and tactics designed to help managers and supervisors like you make your face-to-face communications more effective – and achieve the strong results you, and your management team, need to succeed and meet your goals.

**And where do employees most prefer to get job-related information?**

According to virtually every survey ever done on the subject, the answer is the same: the manager or supervisor.

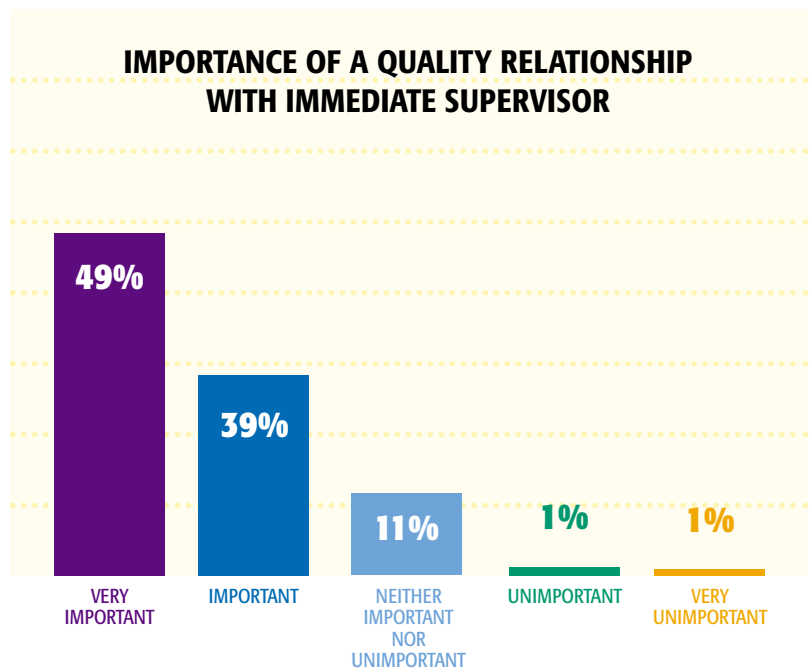
## Communication a key element in job satisfaction, says national study

In a major study on employee job satisfaction conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and CNNfn, three factors related to communication placed in the top eight of 22 "very important" job satisfaction factors that were evaluated.

They were:

- relationship with immediate supervisor
- communication between employees and senior management, and
- management recognition of employee job performance.

Looking inside the numbers, 9 in 10 employees said that the effectiveness of communication between employees and senior management and the quality of the relationship between the employee and the immediate supervisor were important or very important influencers in overall personal job satisfaction.



Source: SHRM, CNNfn 2004

When it comes to communication...

# What makes your employees tick?



Sure, we know that money is a big factor in employee motivation. But an employee survey recently conducted by a large human resources consulting firm suggests communication may be even more important than pay as a factor in motivating and retaining employees.

The evidence comes from Mercer HR Consulting, which recently surveyed 2,600 U.S.

workers about their attitudes regarding their job, management, pay and the work environment.

Among employees who report their organization does a good job of keeping workers informed, just 15% say they are seriously considering leaving their organization and only 6% say they are dissatisfied. On the flip side, among employees who say their organization does not keep them informed, 41% are thinking about leaving and 42% say they are dissatisfied.

## Communication is a big factor in decisions to stay or leave

The gaps aren't as wide on some pay issues, says Mercer, suggesting that communication may play a larger role than pay in shaping employee attitudes. "Clearly, employees value effective communication with their employers," notes Mercer. "It affects their overall commitment and satisfaction and is a major factor in their decisions to stay with or leave an employer."

Why should managers be concerned about retention and job satisfaction in a tight labor market? Because it's smart business to do so. Low productivity, reduced customer service, lack of innovation and problem-solving and poor execution are the by-products of worker alienation. In a hotly competitive world of business, these kinds of negative behaviors can stop a business plan dead in its tracks.

## What do employees want from communication? Here's what they say, and how you can meet their needs:

- "I want more information about how to do my job effectively and how to manage my career."**  
*How managers can help:* Give clear, thorough work directions. Meet regularly with employees to provide performance feedback and discuss business developments. Link business strategy to work unit and individual goals. Point employees toward info resources and developmental opportunities that can help them learn and grow.
- "I want to learn more about the future direction of my organization and how I fit into the plan."**  
*How managers can help:* Help employees understand how they fit into the organization by letting them in on major programs, decisions and challenges and how they can contribute to them.
- "I'd like to see more appreciation from my manager when I do my job well."**  
*How managers can help:* Say thank you or offer a kind word every once in a while – it costs nothing and people can be just as motivated by sincere appreciation as they are by formal rewards. Target praise for specific accomplishments and not to general work.
- "I desire a more open, two-way communication climate that allows me to freely share my opinions and ideas with management."**  
*How managers can help:* Make a strong effort to connect personally with your employees. Encourage dialogue among teams and individual employees. Make your employees feel comfortable communicating with you.
- "I want my boss to stop micro-managing me."**  
*How managers can help:* When practical, give employees authority to make decisions and the flexibility to set goals for themselves and manage their work. Trust them to do the job they've been hired to do.

**The Office Mood  
No News  
Isn't Good News**

Source: Mercer Human Resources Consulting survey of 2,600 U.S. workers

OF THOSE WHO SAY THEIR ORGANIZATION DOES A GOOD JOB COMMUNICATING WITH THEM ...A LOW

**6%**

SAY THEY ARE DISSATISFIED.

OF THOSE WHO SAY THEIR ORGANIZATION DOES NOT KEEP THEM INFORMED ...A HIGH

**42%**

SAY THEY ARE DISSATISFIED.

# Plan out what you want to say, before you say it

*SCENARIO: Supervisor walks in to a conference room with his 15 direct reports for the monthly staff meeting. He begins by saying, "What should we talk about today?"*



*The meeting meanders to a 20 minute discussion about the recent bad weather. Finally, the supervisor focuses on a business topic - the increase in complaints about his department's customer service - and after a few seconds says, "Uh, I left background info on this back in the office. I'm not sure what else to say..."*

*A few minutes later the staff walks back to their cubicles, many grumbling about their disorganized leader and the meeting being a waste of time. Unsaid is that a group problem-solving opportunity slips away due to lack of preparedness by the team's manager.*

Many managers and supervisors hold staff meetings. But the quality of these meetings often suffers because the manager didn't take time to plan out the topics that needed to be covered or the key points that needed to be emphasized during the discussion.

Many managers feel they don't have a natural gift of gab and shy away from face-to-face communication with their employees. So what? You don't have to be a born communicator. The old Boy Scout motto, "Be Prepared," tells it all when it comes to discussion with an employee. Whether it's a staff meeting or a one-to-one session to discuss a problem, plan out in advance what you want to say to employees and how you are going to say it.

Things to think about before your next meeting with a group or an individual employee:

- **Identify key messages** - Jot down the two or three main points you want the individual or team members to take away from the session. Scribble a short note you can peek at during the meeting to remind yourself what to say.
- **Anticipate questions and resistance points** - Think through the issues you will discuss and the types of questions or push-back you may receive as you address them. Prepare well-thought-out answers in advance rather than quick-reaction responses.
- **Keep eye contact** - It's fine to have notes to remind yourself about what you want to say, but don't sit in the meeting and just "read" them to the audience. It's important to maintain eye contact. If you are uncomfortable with your ability to speak on your feet, practice in advance to get familiar with your content.

## We're all different... flex your 'style' to communicate effectively with others

They say love makes the world go round, but it's the differences in people that make the world an interesting place to live and work in.

Making an effort to understand the differences in people – and tailoring your talk to accommodate for social style and cultural differences – can go a long way toward shaping your ability to influence others.

Basically, employees at work fit into one of four social styles: driver, expressive, amiable and analytical. Which style are you?

In their book, *Social Style/Management Style: Developing Productive Work Relationships*, Robert and Dorothy Bolton

suggest these strategies for flexing your style to better communicate with team members:

**Drivers: listen.** Your fast-paced, goal-oriented approach often stresses others, so make a determined effort to listen to others' feelings, suggestions and ideas.

**Expressives: restrain.** Your high energy, verbal fluency, and louder voice may intimidate others, so restrain your tendency to take center stage and act impulsively.

**Amiables: stretch.** Your low-key approach may irritate others who are more goal-oriented. Stretch toward challenging goals, straight talk, and concrete results.

**Analyticals: decide.** Slow, systematic fact-gathering can drive others up the wall unless you learn to take a stand more quickly. To flex, take action, and be more decisive.

Flexing your style to improve communication doesn't mean giving up who you are, but simply adjusting it, at times, for the good of the entire team.

# What should you communicate?

## *GPC...a simple formula to follow*

We all know the term "GPS" and how this hi-tech tool helps lead people to their destination. Well, let's introduce you to "GPC" – Global Positioning Communication – a simple formula to remember when you are thinking about the subject areas you need to cover in your communication with employees.

**Goals** – The "G" in the GPC formula represents the goals of the organization, along with the vision and values that support it. Each employee needs to know where your organization is going, how it will get there and the role each individual is expected to play in supporting the plan. Understanding of goals and direction lays the groundwork for communication about other factors that contribute to success.

**Performance** – Employees desire a frame of reference for their performance on the job. Managers and supervisors communicate about performance by frequently reviewing business results and interpreting what those results mean in relation to goals. Cost, quality, productivity, customer service, orders won/lost are among the prime areas organizations measure and which you should discuss with employees and share ideas for improvement. Celebrate successes to reinforce positive behavior.

**Customers** – Several subjects fall under the "C" in the GPC formula. Because the customer is number one, we'll cover it first. Customers and potential customers (internally as well as externally) each day make decisions which affect employees and their jobs. In your communication with employees, describe who the customers are, what they demand of the organization, what they like and dislike about company activities, and what needs to be done to please them more.



Discuss progress your team is making in meeting schedules and achieving work goals; and encourage dialogue about how to improve service to customers. Provide opportunities for employees to acquire first-hand impressions through interaction with customers.

**Competition** – Employees need to be aware of the forces at work in the marketplace – the struggles for orders and the challenge posed by competitors. Communication can build understanding that the best way to stay competitive is to provide the best combination of price, product, quality, delivery and service. Mention competitors by name and describe their strategies, successes and failures.

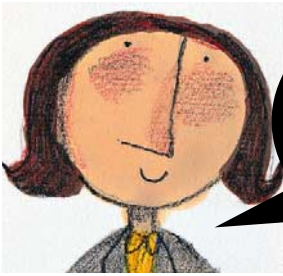
**Change** – Change is a fact of life in business today and managers and supervisors need to help employees get accustomed to it and, in fact, capitalize on it. Cite changes taking place that affect your employees and why changes are being made in relation to company goals and marketplace needs. Help employees to understand that change is essential to stay ahead of the curve and maintain or expand business success.

**Concern** – Employees are always interested in the "What's in it for me?" aspect of the job. How effectively a company meets communication needs in these areas has a big influence on turnover rates. Communicate how the company cares about employees and values them. Communicate about company development programs, pay/benefits philosophy and workplace policies and practices so employees have a thorough understanding of them and know that they are competitive versus the marketplace. Use your team meetings to recognize employees for achievement, such as praise from a customer, completion of a course, suggestion award, etc.

### ...But where do I go to find information to communicate?

Invest some time to get acquainted with potential information sources in your organization.

- Scan information about company values and business goals to discover if there are some key messages that you can reinforce with employees in meeting situations.
- Take a look at your organization's internal and external web sites for press releases and other information that describes activities in your company.
- Check e-mail for company information that should be discussed in staff meetings.
- Investigate industry-related web sites for information you can share about market developments.
- Take good notes in meetings with your boss and the leadership team; peruse staff reports for information that might be useful for your work team.
- If you can't find the information you need, call the expert on that topic or invite them to talk to your employees at a staff meeting.
- And don't hesitate to contact your employee communication office for advice and support.



**E-mail,  
voice mail, or  
face to face?**



## Use the right medium for the right purpose when you communicate

Jack Sprague sits in his office frustrated. An hour before he left for vacation he sent one of his employees an e-mail indicating she was getting a 5.0 "average" rating for her performance during the calendar year.

Now, his first day back, chaos erupts. He listens to angry voice mail messages from his boss, the HR manager and others about how he treats employees. He learns that the employee was upset after she read the e-mail, believing she was a top performer. She took the issue up the chain of command.

"Her performance wasn't all that great," Jack tells the HR manager. "Well, she doesn't know that," the HR manager replies. "She thinks she is great. You should have had a face to face discussion with her to discuss the rating and explain, in depth, how she performed against her performance targets for the year. You don't communicate information like this via e-mail."

As Jack learned the hard way, e-mail has its place in the manager-to-employee communication process, but managers need to carefully think through which channel makes the most sense – face-to-face, e-mail, phone or print – for each communication situation they encounter.

### FOLLOW THIS RULE OF THUMB FOR COMMUNICATION.

◆ **Face-to-face** works best in any situation, but especially so when delivering sensitive or really important information, or when problem-solving, or where you are trying to persuade people to a certain point of view.

◆ **E-mail and phone** work effectively when delivering fast facts, news updates, or answering simple questions. A phone conversation provides at least some personal connection when you can't talk to a person directly but, like e-mail, don't allow it to become a full-time substitute for discussing personal information up close and personal.

◆ **Print** works best for reinforcement and follow up.

Managers should ask themselves the following questions to ensure they are using the right communication medium for the right purpose:

- What is the specific goal of this communication with my employee(s)? Am I passing along basic information that doesn't have immediate, major impact, or does the information require deeper explanation because it will have a profound impact on

everyone? *ACTION: Use face-to-face for info that brings major change; other channels are OK for communicating basic info.*

- What is the desired outcome of the communication? Am I passing along matter-of-fact information or am I attempting to motivate employees toward achievement of a specific goal or action? *ACTION: E-mail, phone, print are fine for general info; use face-to-face, to the extent possible, for motivational purposes.*
- Is the information of a personal nature, related to job factors such as work performance or pay? *ACTION: The info should be conveyed privately, face-to-face.*
- Does the information need to be communicated quickly, or communicated in a low cost way? *ACTION: Use electronic, phone or print to send basic, factual info; use face-to-face, with phone as a fall back, if the info is more personal.*
- Does the information require feedback from employees? *ACTION: Use face-to-face first, but other channels may be OK; use common sense.*
- Am I trying to drive home some key messages to my employees? *ACTION: Repeat the message(s) using multiple media.*

### A short story: belief is all you need

A man was lost while driving through the country. As he tried to read a map, he accidentally drove off the road into a ditch. Though he wasn't injured, his car was stuck deep in the mud. So the man walked to a nearby farm to ask for help.

"Warwick can get you out of that ditch," said the farmer, pointing to an old mule standing in a field. The man looked at the haggardly mule and looked at the farmer who just stood there repeating, "Yep, old Warwick can do the job." The man figured he had nothing to lose. The two men and Warwick made their way back to the ditch.

The farmer hitched the mule to the car. With a snap of the reins he shouted, "Pull, Fred! Pull, Jack! Pull, Warwick!" And the mule pulled the car from the ditch with very little effort.

The man was amazed. He thanked the farmer, patted the mule and asked, "Why did you call out all of those other names before you called Warwick?"

The farmer grinned and said, "Old Warwick is just about blind. As long as he believes he's part of a team, he doesn't mind pulling."

-- Adapted from "Some Folks Feel the Rain...Others Just Get Wet," by James W. Moore

## E-mail is convenient, but don't overdo it: employees still prefer face-to-face contact with the boss



A recent survey of executives at large U.S. companies conducted by *Accountemps* shows a disturbing trend: two-thirds of managers use e-mail messages as a substitute for personalized communication with their employees.

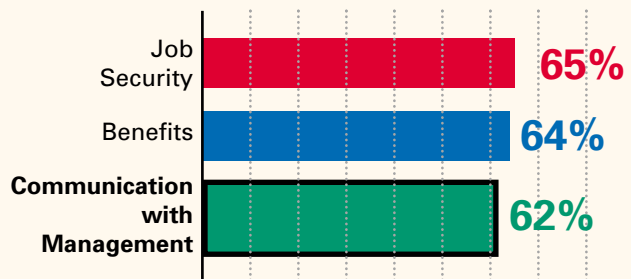
E-mail is fast and convenient, but resist the urge to rely on it too heavily in communication with your direct reports.

This may be the electronic age, but survey after survey shows that employees still prefer face-to-face communication with their boss by a wide margin over any other communication approach. For example, a recent joint study conducted by the *Society of Human Resource Management* and *USA Today* revealed that 62% of employees viewed personal communication with management as one of the most important factors in their job satisfaction.

The passing along of a work instruction, an explanation about a pay adjustment or announcement about a staff reorganization are among the kinds of sensitive communications that should be done in person versus phone or electronic media. Face-to-face reduces the potential for miscommunication.

Next time you need to communicate with one of your employees think about it: send an e-mail; or walk a few steps to deliver the information face-to-face. Your employees prefer the latter. Make the personal touch a winning formula for you.

### What do workers value? The top three preferences



Source: Society for HR Management & USA Today

## Ask the experts

*Nobody reading the e-mails you send? Put these 'golden rules' into practice*



**Q:** *Like most managers, I send e-mails to my direct reports. But it seems that, too often, my employees miss action items I identify in those memos. What can I do?*

**A:** Your e-mail messages are probably too long. Instead, follow the "golden rule" of 21st century employee communication: keep your e-mail messages short and sweet and highlight the priority stuff.

Most employees today are very busy at work and bombarded with so many e-mails that they resort to shortcuts, taking little time to read items in depth. (You should know the feeling, managers!)

To enhance the effectiveness of your e-mails be judicious in your use of words and highlight the most important data. Summarize the most important points at the top of the message, preferably in bullet format, with the details provided underneath. Use a headline at the top of the message to convey a key message point. Another technique: put your key points and "action required" info in bold face or color type, or use other graphic features like underlining.

Some managers today use a standard identifier heading on the e-mails they forward to their employees, such as, "Note From JDC: New Policy Alert," or, "Note From JDC: Meeting This Friday." Advise employees to look for your identifier before they begin their delete routine.

E-mail is a logical tool to communicate fast news, answer simple questions and for editing and reviewing material. But always remember that, first and foremost, employees prefer face-to-face communication from their boss, especially for discussing work problems and complex or sensitive issues.

# Taking the 'dread' out of the performance appraisal discussion

If you took a poll of managers and supervisors about things they like least to do in their job, the employee performance appraisal discussion would probably sit at the top of the list.

For many managers, the performance discussion is dreaded more than going to the dentist. But just as the visit to the dentist isn't so bad if you take care of your teeth, the performance review process isn't so bad, either, if you have taken the time to provide regular performance feedback throughout the year.

## Here are some tips:

**Invest time to plan** – Don't let the workload issue erode the time required to plan and execute a staff development and appraisal plan. You say, "I don't have the time" to give several hours to each employee's performance plan. But think about all the headaches that occur when employees fail to meet your expectations and don't focus on the right priorities.

So, prioritize time for you and your employees to think through and document the individual performance plan for the coming year. Schedule "face time" to build and mold the plan, itemizing needs and objectives consistent with your company appraisal process structure.

Achieve two-way understanding of the performance levels and behaviors you expect before the new performance cycle begins in earnest. Set job standards, goals and deadlines; establish measurement criteria, and clarify training or equipment needs.

**Give regular feedback** – The more performance feedback you provide to the employee during the course of the year, and vice versa, the more comfortable you and they



will be when the year-end performance review takes place.

Surveys show that employees want to know where they stand – at all times. Meet that need by coaching, reinforcing and providing feedback as work gets accomplished. Meet one-on-one with your employees at least once a month to review progress and goals. Motivate outstanding performance by personally congratulating them for accomplishments, celebrating group success and writing personal notes of praise.

**Allow time for "course correction"** – If an employee hits a bump in the road or isn't meeting your performance expectations, let them know as the situation develops. Don't wait until the final performance review to tell them what you think. It's only fair that you give the employee some time to address the deficiencies before the year-end review.

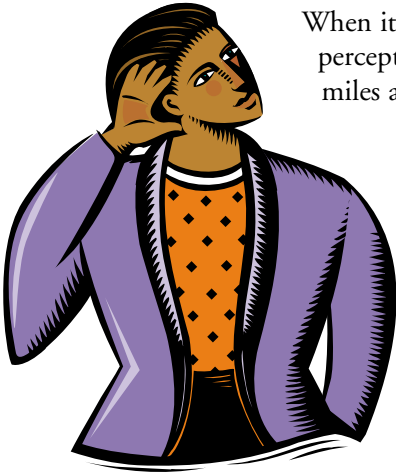
## Final thoughts on performance reviews

Don't lose sight of the valuable role that performance appraisals may play. Employee appraisals provide:

- A means to reinforce, correct and reward behaviors
- A tool that offers the potential to engage, excite and retain employees
- A means to aid the employee's development
- A key element in promotion, pay raise decisions
- A way to document problems, so that if termination becomes necessary, the employer can establish "cause."

## Pssst. Listen up!

*Hear ye, hear ye...listening well helps managers gain respect*



When it comes to listening, perception and reality are often miles apart.

Communication surveys are usually chock full of comments from employees complaining about the poor listening skills of management.

Managers often react with dumbfounded disbelief over these findings.

Today's employees have minimal tolerance for managers who display little interest in listening to what they have to say. In fact, a huge chasm exists between the "casual listening" practiced by many managers and the "deep listening" employees want from them.

"Deep listening" is really "active listening" – intense, visible concentration on what's being said. When managers practice good listening skills, they convey a signal to the speaker that they sincerely care about what is being said.

The dividends of active listening are enormous. Listening well is one of the best ways to gain the respect of those who work for you. It boosts their opinion of you as a leader and they, in turn, are more inclined to listen to you.

Achieving "listening excellence" isn't rocket science. Just follow a few guidelines and you've got it. Here's what you need to do:

*"A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something."*

— Wilson Mizner,  
American Author

- **Focus attention** on the speaker, giving them your undivided attention, listening closely for their main message.
- **Resist distractions**, blocking out noise from the surrounding environment or going to a quieter place that allows you to concentrate better.
- **Be patient, avoid interrupting** the speaker. Let the speaker finish what they have to say.
- **Use body language** to indicate interest. Make eye contact, lean in a little, nod your head to show understanding. The nonverbal cues are important.

- **Indicate your understanding** of what the speaker said by re-framing key points or by asking questions to achieve clarification.

- **Don't tune out** the speaker if you disagree with what's being said. Set aside barriers that may exist between you and the speaker, such as cultural differences, differences in frame of reference, or past interactions. Letting emotions interfere with listening is deadly to the process.

*"It's still embarrassing. I asked my caddie for a sand wedge, and 10 minutes later he came back with a ham and rye."*

— Golfer Chi Chi Rodriquez



**Bad mood rising?**  
*Breathe in... breathe out*

Work life is full of ups and downs. When you, the boss, are

happy - everybody's happy. But when you're not, do you contain it? Or, does the thunder and lightning roll through the plant or office and foul everyone's mood?

Passing your bad day along to employees in the form of tirades, nasty glares and other negative actions can be costly to your credibility and effectiveness. It's not uncommon for managers to see all the good will they've worked hard to build up with employees come crashing down in one forgetful morning or afternoon.

When a bad mood comes over you, go to your office, close the door, take a deep breath and let a feeling of "cool" pass over you. It's times like these that test managers' souls.

Some behavioral experts advise that once you compose yourself, do something positive – like stopping by to visit the employee who's due a thank for a job well done. It'll make the employee feel good and, hey, it may lift your spirits as well.

A BIG, 'LITTLE SECRET' AT ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST ADMIRED COMPANIES

# Employee recognition spurs enthusiasm, success at Southwest Airlines



Southwest Airlines made *Fortune Magazine's* list of most admired companies - again - for the sixth consecutive year. The company's achievements in an industry that is struggling is one of America's great success stories.

Recently, *Coach* asked Southwest officials what managers and supervisors there do to generate such world renowned employee commitment.

"We strive, at all times,

to recognize our employees, as individuals or as a group, in both big and small ways," says Southwest's Whitney Eichinger. "Our managers, at all levels, are a big part of making that happen."

From birthday breakfasts and handwritten notes, to Friday night work team parties and profiles of employees displayed in work areas, Southwest department managers recognize and reward employees for their hard work and service to the company. "There are some formal company programs, but the heart of what we do comes from the informal actions of managers who regularly take the initiative to introduce new, creative ways to show appreciation for employee effort," says Eichinger. "And it works. Appreciate people and you motivate people."

Constantly looking for ways to recognize individual employees, Southwest even features a different employee on the cover of the flight schedule each month. Meanwhile, at corporate headquarters, baby pictures and family photos of employees line the walls, giving each person a chance to share themselves with the rest of the company.

One of the characteristics of 21st century workers is that they expect their personal agenda to be fulfilled before they will reach out and commit to the organization's broader agenda. That personal agenda includes having a feeling of self-worth about the job. Southwest taps into this human need in unique ways. And demonstrates once again that's it's often the little things that add up to create the big things that count - revenue growth, profitability and service excellence.

## Humor with a message of appreciation



Never without a sense of humor, the departments within Southwest Airlines come up with many creative ways to honor employees.

Rewarding a different employee for

outstanding service each quarter, customer relations writers pass around an actual rock for "The Writers Rock" award, the rapids reward telephone staff gives out the "The Golden Headset" award while the "Top Wrench" award is given in the maintenance and engineering department. In San Antonio, Station Leader Rusty Arnolds gives coupons for airport vendors, known as "Rusty's Bucks," as a way of saying "thank you" to special station employees.

### How managers can help (Continued from page 27)

needs different performance and development opportunities. By recognizing the different types of workers on your team and their needs, you can infuse their enthusiasm and motivation with different assignments and projects.

**SET A POSITIVE EXAMPLE** – Live up to the standards you set for people who work for you. Be a role model. Not only listen to employees, but let them see you act on what you say. If you expect employees to treat you with courtesy and respect, you should treat the employees the same way. If you expect additional training to upgrade their knowledge and skills, you should be attending work seminars to fine-tune your management skills as well. Also, be humble and courteous. The less you act like a big shot, the better your employees will respond.

**AND, FINALLY** – Usually a person's behavior isn't going to change overnight. It takes time and patience. But don't give up. You will find that what works well for one person may not work for another. You may have to use "trial and error" until you identify and match the right method to each individual. But the payoff can be huge if the individual becomes more dedicated to the job and a more productive member of the team.

## HOW TO CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF IDEAS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

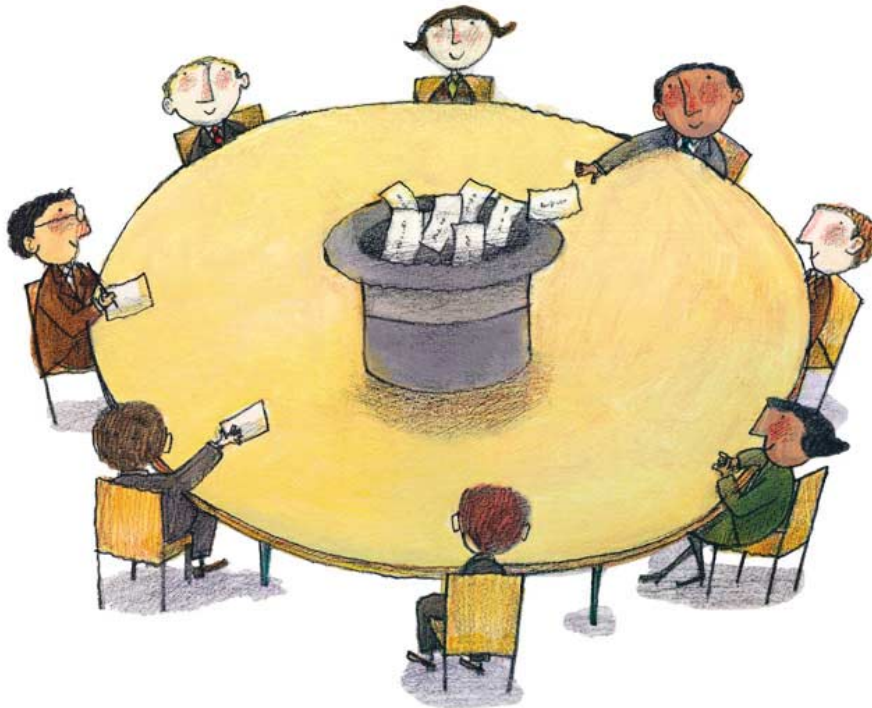
# Companies that welcome employee ideas often thrive

"I knew how to solve that problem, and I could have saved them a lot of time and money, had they only asked me. But gee, what do I know, right? I'm only a peon on the front lines and they never seem to care about what I think. So I don't speak up."

The comment above, spoken by a real employee in a real focus group, is too commonplace in business today.

Many innovative ideas for improving productivity, processes and products never get shared because employees believe that management isn't listening and just isn't interested.

That's disappointing because companies that welcome employee ideas can thrive, say Alan Robinson and Dean Schroeder, based on their work with more than 300 companies.



getting ideas monitor which employees are turning them in, which managers are getting them, and how rapidly they are acted on."

As for organizations with limited idea sharing, the authors says that egos get in the way, reward programs may be unfair, or ideas get buried in bureaucracy, making workers believe that offering a suggestion is more

suggestion or input. Welcome the input as an opportunity to make changes that help.

■ **Respond promptly & positively.** Simply inviting employee input and ideas isn't enough. What you do with it determines whether the flow of information continues. Letting a suggestion sit for months without response or action on your part kills

enthusiasm. Instead, quickly move the idea down the road to review – and hopefully acceptance – and tell the originator where the process stands along the way. In the end, an idea may not be implemented, but get back to the employee to let them know you value their inputs and to keep the ideas coming.

What about those reward programs with cash for good ideas? Robinson and Schroeder say these systems may backfire if you're not careful.

They relate the ultimate horror story: A CEO of a large European wireless communications company sat on an idea from an employee for years that pointed out how the system was failing to bill customers for at least \$26 million a year in international calls. That's because the employee's reward of about \$13 million – half the first year's savings – would have embarrassed the CEO, drawing attention from the company's board of directors and the news media.

Robinson and Schroeder advise it's better to create a bonus pool for people who contribute to ideas during a certain period, such as monthly or quarterly.

## Ideas positively impact the bottom line

Connecticut publisher Boardroom Inc. averaged 104 ideas per employee in 2002, and its sales per employee were more than seven times greater than the average publisher. Britain's Richer Sounds, also known for encouraging ideas, has been listed repeatedly in the Guinness Book of Records for having the highest sales per square foot of any sound system retailer in the world.

In their book, *"Ideas Are Free: How the Idea Revolution is Liberating People and Transforming Organizations,"* Robinson and Schroeder say that "organizations that are successful at

frustrating than rewarding. In some companies, management sends chillingly clear signals to employees that their ideas are neither welcomed nor valued.

## Action steps to encourage ideas

To turn the tide, you as the manager or supervisor need to cultivate a culture of open communication. Some steps you can take:

### ■ Create a culture of ideas.

Employees need to feel it's safe to speak up and share their ideas with management. Encourage them to do so. Give the employee your total attention as you hear the idea. Say thanks for the