Communicate To Set Expectations

Your employees are full of the potential to be good workers. Sure, once in a while you hire a dud that you eventually have to fire. Even your best employees, however, aren't always the good, conscientious workers you thought you hired, are they?

What makes that potentially good worker a consistently good worker? Or, what keeps that worker with so much potential from becoming the worker you want?

At the top of my list is morale. People work better, smarter, and harder when their morale is high. When morale hits bottom, they don’t care or think much about their work and do as little as possible. So how do you keep employee morale high?

The first step is to get employees to have realistic expectations about their jobs. How? Communicate clearly and honestly with them about their jobs, your expectations, and their futures in the business. Then they can stop worrying about what they don’t know. They can set realistic expectations and focus on being successful in their jobs. Success improves morale.

So how do you communicate clearly and honestly to set realistic expectations?

First, tell employees what you really expect of them. Do this in your first interviews with prospective employees. Lay out everything—mental and physical demands, schedule, work environment, job priorities, on down to how they will be held accountable. Hiring employees who don't understand what they are getting into will have morale plummeting on day one.

Tell them these things several times and in several ways because new employees have so much coming at them that they cannot possibly remember it all. Put the information in the training manual and employee handbook. During training have employees deal with several examples of typical and unusual work situations. Tell them what they must change or improve and—more importantly—praise them for what they do well. Praise always improves morale.

Tell them what the job stresses are. Explain how to recognize the stressful situations and the effects it has on them. Expecting stress keeps it from being so terrible.

Coach them in stress-relieving techniques such as taking a deep breath, counting to ten, walking away, taking a time out. Learn stress-management techniques yourself and pass them on. Knowing that you care enough to warn them and coach them builds their trust in you.

Communicate regularly with longtime employees as well as new ones. They also need to hear about their jobs and the business. Job appraisals are indeed a form of communications, but don’t let them be the only times you communicate with these employees. All employees appreciate praise and respond to correction on the job. If you’re not one for many words, a simple "good job" and "remember to finish that other job" lets them know that you appreciate good work and that you can calmly correct their oversights.

Tell employees you will listen to them. Then do it. If you don’t listen, they will talk to other workers or customers. Just having you listen to their suggestions and complaints can be a reward. And you may
hear things that can improve the business.

Use a mixture of styles and methods to communicate with employees. Tell them your vision for the business and how they fit into it. Coach them to grow in their work and to reach their goals. Show concern for what they need on the job and in their personal lives, especially at times when their personal needs are stressful. Let them know that you believe the job is less important than a child’s birth, constructing a new home, or a parent’s severe illness. Make time to get employees’ ideas into business decisions. And set a good (but reasonable) example as a worker yourself.

Stay on message. If your message is about working overtime, don’t mix in your thoughts about the company picnic. Mixing messages, particularly ones of different tones, may confuse your employees. Communications should make things clearer. Confusion does not help them set expectations.

Be consistent with your messages. Don’t communicate one position one week and another the next. For an extreme example, if you say that you expect a certain amount of overtime every week, don’t announce the next week that you will never require overtime. At least don’t do that without an explanation of what changed to make you reverse your policy. Unexplained changes undermine employees’ expectations and cause them to distrust you and ignore your messages.

Choose an appropriate way to communicate, one that gets the message across accurately, cheaply, and quickly. Don’t deliver a message your employees won’t understand and don’t spend more money or time than you have to. Consider memos, one-on-one conversations, meetings, and emails. And the bigger your business, the more choices you have.

Whatever you do, make sure your audience, whether one or a hundred, is interested in what you have to say and that you are not merely indulging yourself. Employees will best remember your communications when they have strong, memorable openings or closings and deliver no more than seven key points. Interesting, honest, straight-to-the-point communications about the job help employees set realistic expectations. That will improve morale.

Now make a plan to improve communications between you and your employees. For more information on communication and employee morale, check these sources, where I got some ideas and information. Lee Hopkins, a business psychologist, shares his ideas on www.hopkins-business-communication-training.com. Anne M. Obarski’s insights can be found at www.merchandiseconcepts.com. http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com/speaking.html. And Robert A. Isaacson is a business coach and organizational consultant and can be found through www.fullcirclesolutions.net. Or make an appointment with a SCORE counselor at (507)288-8103, info@score-rochester.org, or www.score-rochester.org.

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