

Want to reach staff? Tell them a story

Best workplaces have a corporate culture of open and honest communication

BY GRAHAM LOWE

Communication is a basic part of a manager's role. Yet managers often lack the incentives, resources, skills or understanding needed to effectively communicate with their employees. The opposite is true in great places to work, where open, honest and continuous two-way communication is the life blood of a high-trust culture.

Fundamentally, great workplaces are all about the quality of relationships. And you can't have strong and positive relationships without effective communication. This means managers must reach out to employees, talk with them, discuss what it means to live the organization's values, hear their ideas and concerns, and encourage feedback on all aspects of their work experience.



■ HR RESEARCH
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Lessons from Best Companies to Work For

Valuable lessons about excellent employee communication can be learned from the Great Place to Work Institute's research for *Fortune* magazine's list of *100 Best Companies to Work For* in the United States, as well as the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) lists: the *25 Best Small Companies to Work For* and the *25 Best Medium Companies to Work For*.

An important lesson is that the cultural practices of great workplaces depend on a relentless commitment by managers at all levels to connect with

employees. Here are some examples of the best communication practices from leading companies.

Storytelling strengthens culture

Storytelling is a powerful means of reinforcing organizational values, integrating new hires, and strengthening the culture. Managers are lead storytellers. At Wegmans, a Rochester, N.Y.-headquartered supermarket chain at the top of the 2005 *Fortune* list, the 30,000 employees share their positive experiences through stories. This reinforces the importance of speaking from experience. The company teaches people how to do this and makes it easy by using a "story template" for communications.

At the top of the 2004 SHRM list is Analytical Graphics of Exton, Pa., a software company with 240 staff. The CEO believes that creating a fun work

environment is the best way to foster innovation, which will sustain the firm's healthy growth well into the future. It is a flat organization with open communication; the company has numerous benefits and perks. But what makes it unique is "story time." Every Friday at lunch, employees gather and pass around the microphone, telling business and personal stories. The CEO starts the ball rolling. It is an informal opportunity to share business developments, to get to know fellow co-workers, to recognize achievements — and to have fun.

Front-line managers must connect with staff

Regular and consistent messages from leaders are another element of effective communication, showing that employees are valued and ensuring everyone understands their roles in achieving the corporate mission and vision. FedEx has a compellingly simple corporate philosophy: people, service, profit. This is the FedEx "purple promise," which is reinforced far and wide at work sites by front-line supervisors.

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Employees view a monthly video from their leader with three or four key messages. Front-line managers are not only in the best position to deliver and discuss these messages with employees, but by doing so they deepen the sense of trust employees have in the corporation and its leadership.

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San Diego high-tech firm Qualcomm has developed ways to support front-line managers to be excellent communicators with employees. Their management training focuses on developing people skills to engage and motivate employees. Managers are also provided with practical communication resources: slide decks for staff meetings, FAQs, video messages, employee recognition tools, career development resources and performance review information.

Much of this is web-based. Employees at all

levels rely on the “daily news” feature on the company’s website for corporate news. New hires (and anyone else who signs up) are enrolled in a “52 weeks” program, which sends them a weekly e-mail for a year with stories about the company.

Listening generates innovation and transformation

Listening to employees builds a sense of ownership and commitment. Eileen Fisher, a U.S.-based retailer of women’s clothing, strives to create a wellness environment for staff, one that inspires people to do their work with passion and creativity. The company conducted extensive employee consultations on how best to live the company’s mission — which is to inspire simplicity, creativity and delight through connection and great design. “Truth telling” is highly valued, as it enables everyone to learn from both successes and mistakes.

When leaders genuinely listen to employees the results can be transformative. Synovus Financial Corp of Columbus, Ga., reached a turning point in the mid-1990s. Growth and profitability were strong, but there was little focus on employees. The CEO

realized the need to turn the HR strategy upside-down, putting people at the centre of the firm’s business model, when he heard an employee’s question at a meeting: “What about people?” The result was a strengthened value chain — people, culture, strategy, execution and performance — which guides leadership decisions. Now there are monthly culture meetings with the CEO to discuss what reinforces core values and the culture. Executives regularly visit work sites and talk with employee groups to understand their message.

All eyes on the CEO

At great workplaces, the actions of the CEO send powerful signals about the value of employees. At Xilinx, a San Jose, Calif., firm that makes digital programmable logic devices, the CEO passionately believes that the company’s culture is its competitive advantage. Unlike technology, customer relations or branding, a unique culture can’t be replicated by competitors.

Innovation is the core of Xilinx’s “people-centric” culture. The CEO plays a major role in sustaining this culture, spending 10 to 20 per cent of his time communicating directly with employees. He moves

offices frequently to get to know employees, holds monthly meetings with employees, posts Q&As on the firm’s website, encourages storytelling that shows how corporate values guide decisions, and gives out “values medallions” every quarter to acknowledge an employee who has exemplified the values.

Connecting with the hearts and minds of employees is what effective communication is all about. Companies recognized for their efforts to create and sustain high-trust cultures deserved it, in large part, because they have followed through on a commitment to foster genuine two-way communication.

The challenge for all organizations is finding their own way to turn this basic element of human relationships into an enabler of cultural transformation. The journey to a great workplace is a series of small and often basic steps, reflected in simple behaviours such as asking, listening and sharing.

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