

Open Lines

Communication Proves Critical for Top Companies

By Matt L. Ottinger

If you've ever played the "grapevine" or "telephone" game in which a secret is passed from one person to another until the end result is revealed by the last person in line, you know how distorted a message can become.

And there's a famous saying – usually attributed to Winston Churchill – that states "a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to put its pants on." So just imagine how quickly misinformation can travel throughout a business – especially if that company has more than one location.

The Indiana Organ Procurement Organization (IOPO) has over 80 staffers in its Indianapolis office, although many others work out of labs and home offices in Fort Wayne, Evansville and South Bend. Sam Davis, director of professional services and public affairs, explains effective communication is critical.

"(Communication) with employees is essential, as it is with customers and vendors," he says. "Our employees need to understand the industry because there are a lot of outside regulatory bodies who influence what we do. ... We try to mitigate rumors quickly."

Davis adds that previous Best Places to Work surveys revealed some employees felt communication in the company could be improved.

"We then put together a work group to gain feedback," he remarks. "Interestingly, what we learned was that the need for improvement was not so much between leadership and staff, but between departments. Sometimes we get so focused on what we're doing, we forget there are other people who work here. Some of it was a lack of sharing information, and some was territorial issues."

Davis says the task force met monthly and assigned liaisons to work with other departments.

All things – and people – being equal

Another roadblock in communication efforts can stem from intimidation, as some employees feel uncomfortable approaching a company's top officers.

"We have an open door communication policy, so any employee can go to the office of anyone at any level of management," relays Dave Richter, president of United Consulting in Indianapolis. "Employees really do have good ideas; we just have to find ways to tap into that."

Sherri Umbaugh, human resources director for Indianapolis-based health law firm Hall Render Killian Heath & Lyman, concurs that equal access is a useful tool.

"We have an open door policy, so everyone is accessible to anyone in the organization," she says. "And we have an intranet to communicate internal messages, and any employee can post messages on that – not just administrative people."

Terry Farmer, managing partner at Bamberger, Foreman, Oswald & Hahn, explains keeping staff unified is integral. He says that even though the firm's 100 employees are located in different offices, they were placed on a common switchboard.

"The psychology alone of dialing different area codes to speak with each other can make people feel separated," he offers.

Farmer adds that the company's video conferencing technology not only allows employees in different offices to speak face-to-face, but it can also unify staff in times of celebration.

"We've had retirement parties and allowed others to look in and participate," he says.

In addition to quality face time, recognition also serves as a driving force to keep staff motivated. Parkview Health in Fort Wayne puts that notion on paper – or at least e-paper.

"Our CEO sends weekly kudos to our 7,000-plus co-workers that highlights values and actions that have taken place," offers Debra Williams, senior vice president of human resources. "It not



only shows what staff is doing, but shows how we're taking care of our patients."

Such programs work in tandem with her efforts in human resources, Williams explains.

"From an HR perspective, we understand how (effective communication) shapes our culture," she notes. "So when we're shaping the benefits we offer, we do get their feedback on the front end and do focus groups at the beginning of the process."

Weapons in the battle against miscommunication

Davis explains e-mail is a useful communication tool because of its speed, especially because some IOPO employees work outside of the Indianapolis headquarters.

Additionally, the company has an internal web site portal that contains critical information; video teleconferencing is used to communicate as well.

Farmer asserts the importance of ensuring company news is not only accessible, but processed by employees. That's why staffers are privy to information about the Bamberger firm as soon as their computers are turned on.

"We've developed a splash page that appears on their screens, so it's the first thing they see every day," he says. "And it requires action to close it, so they definitely deal with it each morning."

The blogosphere is also a realm that lends itself to internal communication, especially for companies whose employees are in different locations.

"We have an internal blog where we can share company news and announcements beyond HR-related information," explains Mark Juleen, vice president of marketing at J.C. Hart Company (which is based in Carmel, but its 75 associates operate in 13 different apartment communities). "We also have an external blog that keeps others aware of what we're doing."

Juleen adds that all employees are expected to check in or

United Consulting took a team ski trip to Perfect North Slopes (Lawrenceburg) in February 2009 as a way to bring staff together.



Members of the Indiana Organ Procurement Organization's clinical staff in Indianapolis share data and review process updates via teleconference with colleagues in IOPO's Fort Wayne office. IOPO uses technology to help staff stay connected.

subscribe to the blog, and he observes metrics to gauge how many are using it.

Additionally, J.C. Hart launched an online university to help its staff engage in best practices for the company.

Perhaps the greatest communication tool is not a medium or technology, but a character trait – honesty.

"You really need to prove to the staff that you're honest all the time – to the clients, to them, to everyone," United Consulting's Richter explains. "Because if the staff sees you're not honest with your clients, they'll probably feel you're not being honest with them. Sometimes you can't tell your staff everything that's going on, but being as open and honest as possible is huge."

Though it takes a variety of forms, many believe communication is imperative in allowing a company to garner the moniker of Best Place to Work. When asked about the importance of communication, Williams of Parkview Health asserts that on a scale from one to 10, it would be a 10.

"It helps people engage who want to provide discretionary effort," she says. "They want to understand what's expected and the culture of the company. Effective communication is the glue that holds all strategies together."

And for many organizations, a progressive attitude is key in keeping staff unified and moving toward a common goal.

"Communication is a pivot point in any business, but it's also one of the most challenging aspects of what we do," Juleen adds. "You really have to keep your foot on the pedal, moving forward. That's what ultimately makes a company have effective communication – not accepting the status quo."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Indiana Organ Procurement Organization at www.iopo.org

Bamberger, Foreman, Oswald & Hahn, LLP at www.bamberger.com

J.C. Hart Company at www.homeisjchart.com

United Consulting at www.ucindy.com

Parkview Health at www.parkview.com

Hall Render Killian Heath & Lyman at www.hallrender.com