

## EFFECTIVE EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS CAN PAY OFF

### SUMMARY

There is no more important audience to business management than employees. Unfortunately, communication with employees about topics that concern them like fringe benefits, how the company is doing or a new product line, is too often overlooked by employers as a "waste of time." Although the impact of a positive on-going employee relations program is difficult to measure in numerical terms, there is little question that a satisfied, informed, cohesive employee force can bring big gains in terms of productivity, attendance, union avoidance, etc. This BMA tells you some of the "whys" and "hows" of effective employee communications.

Henry Ford II, in an address made at an Annual Meeting of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States said:

*"We recently sent out a questionnaire to everyone who works for the Ford Motor Company. More than 22,000 of our people took the trouble to fill out the questionnaire.*

*"Thirty-nine percent of them feel that the policies of our Company have never been explained to them. More than one-third have the impression that no effort is being made to make them feel a part of the Ford Motor Company..."*

Our employees - like ourselves - are living, human beings. They are concerned with security of employment and adequate compensation for their efforts.

More than that, they want to feel that they belong - that the owner or manager has a personal interest in them and their problems - that they are not just forgotten cogs in a big wheel.

To help bring this out and into the open we, as employers, must take a fresh, searching look at the situation - at ourselves - and at our role in intra-plant communications.

### HARMONIOUS TEAMWORK

Human relations are more important today than ever before in making (and selling) tools, dies, and special machinery, and in machining work. Everything you can do to encourage harmonious teamwork - between employer and employee - is essential to the success of your business.

Avoid the emotional gap that sometimes springs up between management and employee. Avoid cold aloofness in communicating with employees. Avoid talking down to people. Communicating in terms of mutual concern pays off.

### MAKE KNOWN THE FACTS - GOOD OR BAD

Never duck subjects that may be unpleasant, untimely, or embarrassing. They often offer a good opportunity to establish a climate of credibility. When all eyes are upon management, when all ears await the company's answer, silence, evasiveness, or whitewash won't work.

Discuss the bad as well as the good, defeat as well as success. Management courage is an indispensable ingredient that results in understanding relations when the communications job has been well done. Lack of courage to discuss profits, employment security, layoffs, union negotiations, price increases and other things of importance to employees solve no problems and only serve to promote distrust.

### EMPLOYEES EASILY DETECT YOUR "FEELING" ABOUT THEM

You don't bridge the gap between employees and management by delivering cool sermons-in-print. Coldly formal language under a banner such as "A Word from Management" repels rather than attracts. Speak about our problems, our future, our success, our company. And mean it.

Real communication gets its impetus from top management. Without continued, determined personal participation at this level, little is achieved. Success communication is not only through printed matter or verbal exchanges, but in

management's feeling for employees. This is easily detected and inspires employee feeling for management. Don't forget that the behavior of top management is always a subject for serious discussion throughout the plant. It helps set the climate in which the company lives and moves and has its being.

Employees witnessing the demonstrable integrity of employers are slow to engage in strikes, slowdowns, and industrial bitterness. Remember - over the years the individual absorbs and reflects the communicated concept of your company, your plant, your futures. Consistent sincerity in word and purpose insure consistent credibility and growing trust.

### **KEEP EMPLOYEES ON YOUR TEAM**

We should create the kind of environment in which all of our employees can develop and prepare for great responsibilities. As the individuals improve and grow, so will the company.

Development of key employees should be a prime responsibility of management. Those who carry the burden of responsibility in helping to run the business deserve, and should receive, full consideration. They should be completely familiar with company policies and objectives, and know about plans for the future - their future.

Management insistence that employees are "on the team" means little unless the company enters the emotional consciousness of the individual on a permanent and expanding basis - via an on-going employee communication program.

### **PEOPLE ARE PROBLEMS**

Most of the problems facing individual management resolve themselves into terms of people - people at work in the plant; people legislating in local, state, and federal government; people buying the plant's products and services; people voting for business, or against it. People-related issues constitute a single common denominator providing possible long-term solutions to problems growing in an area of change. Yet people are not governed just by executive say-so. They do not withhold strike action because management wishes to continue production. They do not give approval to company policies just because management is convinced that what it proposes is fair and desirable. To win customers toward buying their products many managements go all out in their persuasion. Yet they will neglect to cultivate employees and others upon whose understanding - and cooperation - both production and company security depend.

Some managements are beginning to realize the importance of intra-plant communications and their relation to day-to-day business operations. But there is not, as yet, a widespread awareness that with a little extra effort management can comfortably close existing gaps between employees and itself.

### **"ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS"**

Credibility cannot be created by words, but only by integrity of purpose and action. Management has to be certain that

what it does squares up with what it says. Management's policies, decisions, and actions demonstrate its attitude toward employees. Words are not capable of wholly erasing what the employee experiences while on the job. And this emphasizes the need for management to seriously think through and plan its basic relationships with employees and other important groups. Without carefully-charted communication based on demonstrated sincerity, confusion can result - and sometimes distrust. The ideal situation never comes about by chance or luck. It is the direct result of purposeful management determination to seek long-term cooperation and understanding.

### **CONTINUE COMMUNICATION**

To keep close to your people, communication must be continuous. To communicate only when management wants something, or when picket lines are forming, is a waste of money. The most gifted "special" communication, the most persuasive argument on this or that has little chance if presented only when the heat is on. Continue, regularly, to reach your employees with sound views and "we're all on the same team" spirit.

### **REPORT - ANNUALLY OR SEMI-ANNUALLY**

An important medium for communicating pertinent economic information on company operations is the employee annual report.

Preparation for the report should be a careful, cautious, exacting job. Establish a pattern. Determine its areas of coverage. Will it contain pictorial review of progress? A forecast of things to come? A financial report? Don't blow your own horn. An annual report for employees is no place for the windy expression of company self-esteem. If it's a good year, the facts themselves will speak well for good management, good products, good employee relations. Let the employees draw these conclusions for themselves.

Consider using a question and answer section. Your report-compiler should know the questions typical employees might ask. Build up a file of such questions, with to-the-point answers for use in a possible, clarifying section in the report.

An annual report is news. Treat it as such. Get employees to participate. Keep sentences short. Paragraph frequently. Make the report readable by using large enough type.

Don't bury the facts. Avoid the sharp but obvious practice of making things look better - or worse - than they are. Don't try to conceal profits. Don't make the report too elaborate. Any small company can afford such a report and will benefit by issuing one. What your report looks like isn't half as important as how effectively it tells its story.

An employee report is not a "one-shot" message. Make it annually, or semi-annually if you wish. It will pay dividends in employee loyalty, cooperation, confidence, and lasting friendship.

<p><b>This BMA was reviewed by NTMA staff and Fred Harmon Synthesis Consulting, Annandale VA.</b></p>
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