

## BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

**A**s I write this 3,000 members of a railway union are threatening to strike. We are told such action could cause the biggest rail disruption in a decade. Not surprisingly, this does not endear the union to the hearts of the millions of rail travellers who hope that common sense and good negotiation prevails.

What brought management and workers to the brink of discord so serious as to potentially alienate the very people they are there to serve? It's no surprise. Money – pay deals and pension schemes. For most of us, these are cornerstones of our work ethic. It doesn't take a huge mental leap to understand why threats to their security can create instant friction.

But what has really caught my eye is a phrase almost lost in the media coverage. A union leader is quoted as saying the employer had changed pension arrangements 'without a word of negotiation'. And there you have it. If this is indeed the case, and even if management considers it has discussed pension changes with its workforce, there has been a perceived breakdown in communication. And communication is the very thing that keeps the wheels of goodwill turning between employer and employee.

When seeking to dissect and resolve key communication issues, it's important to adopt an independent viewpoint to facilitate the journey from communication chaos to a point where a clear employee relations strategy is mapped out for internal managers to implement.

### CRITICAL COMMUNICATION

As a leader, you can learn the nuts and bolts of what you do – technical skills, budget management, how to start up a company etc. But what really sets good leaders apart is excellence in communication.

Empathy, in particular, is a valuable quality for anyone involved in developing employee



Clear and honest communication holds the key to positive industrial relations. **Lyn Bicker** explains why its good to talk – especially during times of discord

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communication. Often perceived as trite, I believe the ability to consider an issue from another person's perspective remains a powerful tool. Indeed, in developing employee relations strategies it is critical.

I work with a head of a large transport organisation. His approach to everyday employee communication is to get out there among his people. He has conversations with them. He hears what makes or potentially breaks their job while they are doing it. This is not an occasional, grandiose tactic. It is part of a consistent approach to understanding what impacts people on a daily basis. Uncomfortable problems can usually be dealt with before they arise, because the boss can see them appearing on the horizon.

And therein lies another key to successful communication strategy. Managers are often too busy managing to keep their antennae tuned to issues that might be creeping up on them. But when there is not enough time or investment in employee relations, minor gripes fester until they become burning grievances – because people have made assumptions and their expectations have not been met.

Here's a classic case. Workers assume they will automatically receive a pay rise; they deliver consistent results, they deserve more money. But their boss assumes staff want the organisation to be a success. After all, this will help secure jobs. Times are tough and there are no automatic pay increases. Tougher appraisal objectives are set. Employees are at first disappointed, then resentful, then disaffected.

The employer is frustrated, demanding, defensive. Each party begins to withdraw from the other. It doesn't matter what the reasons behind the discord are, goodwill becomes an oasis in a desert of mistrust. Reciprocal promises and obligations implied in the relationship between employee and employer founder and the psychological contract is fractured.

But we are fortunate to be able to



Communication is a two-way street. Employers need to listen and respond to their staff as much as they broadcast their information

seek comfort in that wonderful human emotion – hope. There is a core desire for a return to honesty and harmony. Empathy and good communication can help injured parties get back on track. They can help identify and bring about collaboration to achieve shared aims.

In order to achieve this, it's important to develop an employee relations strategy that aligns three elements: business objectives, workforce objectives and abilities,

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and individual staff aspirations. But improving organisational culture and structure requires an investment in dialogue, empathy and understanding.

### IMPROVING STRATEGIES

Another transport company I worked with wanted to develop an employee relations strategy. But when it came to communicating with its workforce, there was a sea of uncertainty. The client was unsure of the difference

between an external and an internal communication plan. There was no feedback on whether the workforce thought communication was good or bad. New communication approaches had succeeded only in alienating some people.

The first thing I did was help the client identify its internal communication needs by assessing the quality and effectiveness of the written communication available and

gauging staff awareness of top issues. Then the employer was in a position to decide what communication methods to ditch, and which tried and tested methods it should adopt to reap specific rewards.

One new approach was to bring together leaders from regional business units with other key business operations such as quality control, the press office and marketing. They discussed how to improve communication. They talked about improvements in other areas and got to know each other better.

The final outcome of this kind of investment in communication development can be true collaboration and mutual trust between employer and employee. Ultimately, staff can experience an almost personal focus on their hopes and fears, while employers benefit from an enthused workforce delivering the almost priceless e-factor – extra effort. ■

## COMMUNICATION STRATEGY CORNERSTONES

### ■ Never assume

Is your workforce hearing what you say – or has the situation arisen where it only hears what it wants to hear? Find out people's interpretation of your key issues. Review all communication processes and tools. Adopt both structured and informal approaches to communication.

### ■ Face-to-face contact

Talk to people, rather than sending e-mails or memos. Face-to-face contact helps to create a stronger relationship.

### ■ Consistency is key

When staff ask questions, answer truthfully and consistently. If you don't know an answer, own up and make sure you endeavour to go and find one.

### ■ Trust your people

When times are challenging, ensure your workforce understands what is happening. Staff will feel valued and trusted and be more inclined towards a productive relationship with the organisation.

### ■ Ask for help

Your people's ideas might provide you with the breakthrough you need – and their commitment will be absolute.

### ■ When actions speak louder than words

Remember, staff may not notice what you do, but they'll definitely notice what you don't do.