



technical bulletin

Municipal Technical Advisory Service
Institute for Public Service, The University of Tennessee
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HOW WELL DO YOU TALK WITH YOUR TROOPS?

DO YOU have a planned program for keeping city employees up-to-date on what's going on? And if you do, is the flow of information just downward or both ways?

At the 1975 Public Relations Society of America national conference recently in New York City, several keys to good employee communications were discussed:

- 1) The main thing employees want to know is "What does it mean to my job?"
- 2) Messages must be tailored for many diverse groups of employees. The same one won't be useful to everybody every time.
- 3) Types of information generally break down into:
 - a) General news about the organization
 - b) Employee information (benefits, wages, etc.)
 - c) Public affairs information (where the organization stands on certain issues and why)
 - d) Operations and safety information

The first three categories usually originate with the central administration. The fourth comes from within each operating unit (department).

4) Face-to-face communication is still the best. Employees want answers from their first-line supervisor. And he/she can usually do the job, especially if management makes it clear this is part of the job and provides information on a timely basis. Some private companies have management seminars for employees, conducted by top executives who leave time for questions.

- 5) Other effective tools for communication include:
 - a) Newsletters, the most convenient means, if done well
 - b) Special information materials for an often-neglected group -- retirees
 - c) Bulletin boards, if used on a program basis. Timeliness and close policing are the keys to effectiveness. Put up special sheets only for REAL news. Remove most materials within three days.
 - d) Television, the fastest growing method. Companies are using closed circuit systems. City governments could utilize, where available, the government channel available from cable systems. TV puts "a face behind the memo" and is the next best thing to face-to-face communication. However, it should be used only when the message is clearly defined and is most effective when combined with other materials and/or personal presentations.
 - e) Slides, flip charts, etc., have their place, particularly in conjunction with personal presentations.

DEC 10 1975

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6) Provision must be made for two-way communication between management and employees. Means must be established for an employee to go directly "to the top" if necessary. Such contacts can serve as "early warning" signals of future trouble. Techniques include question forms which protect the identity of the questioner. Among other successful programs:

- a) Annual report meetings for all employees, on released time
- b) Meetings between supervisors and employees to discuss specific problem areas. "Background source statements" are developed for those making the presentation. These have a double benefit, users say: preparing the statement helps crystalize top level opinions.

Behind all this is one idea: You've GOT to keep employees informed and provide ways for them to talk to top level management. Such a flow of information benefits you as well as your "troops": they often know about problems before you do! And don't think you can afford to do nothing if your work force is small. It takes only two people to start a rumor: one to whisper it and one to hear it.

-- Jackie Kersh
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