Improving Organizational Communication

Strategic Recommendations for Effective Shelter Communication

Shelter Diagnostic System (SDS)

THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

UNCCHARLOTTE

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SDS assesses employees' perceptions of the amount, timeliness, and quality of information sharing as well as the quality of work meetings. Together, these questions provide insight into the quality of communication in the organization.   Across the many shelters that have used SDS, communication appears to be a common growth area. Generally speaking, all organization from large corporations to small establishments can benefit from improving communication flow both vertically (supervisor to employee) and horizontal (between coworkers). The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendation for improving communication. We recommend that you go through these recommendations picking and choosing what you think will work for your particular shelter. We also encourage you to ask your employees directly their ideas for improving communications at the shelter.

1. We suggest the use of a "Question Box". Many organizations have suggestion boxes placed around the organization and encourage employees to provide suggestions on how to improve processes or the work environment. Instead of looking for suggestions (or in addition to), the question box provides an opportunity for employees to ask questions or request information.   A virtual question box may also be used. A virtual question box is an online anonymous location where employees and managers can submit questions from any networked computer without physically dropping them in the publicly placed box. The key to success with this intervention is to take questions seriously and provide very prompt feedback (e.g. 36 hour turnaround or less). Meetings may be a good place to summarize the questions and provide answers when appropriate. Or, the questions and answers can be posted on a bulletin board.

2. Our next recommendation is a program called the "Ask me/Tell me" program. Instead of waiting for employees to seek out information, managers and supervisors can approach them directly and ask

about employees' informational needs. For example, most meetings in organizations end with the meeting leader asking if anyone has any questions. We encourage managers and supervisors to move that question to the beginning of each meeting. This simple switch tells employees that their questions and concerns are more important than the impending meeting agenda. By quickly responding to their concerns and informational needs, their perception of the communication concern in the organization will likely change. In order to keep the program going, it may be helpful to require managers and meeting leaders to schedule time for "Ask me/Tell me" until it becomes part of the organizational culture.

3. Create opportunities for more informal time for employees to interact with managers. Employees are often hesitant to interrupt their busy boss for small things such as information needs. Managers who provide opportunities for casual work conversation actually help employees feel needed and comfortable with sharing their information needs. To do this, managers should work alongside staff, take them to lunch, walk to their car after work together, etc. Initiating "water-cooler" conversations and fostering open communication through these informal means supplements communication that occurs through formal reporting lines.

4. Try to improve the quality of your meetings. Here are some general suggestions for how to run a better meeting. First, try to plan meetings well in advance to maximize efficiency. The meeting organizer should send out an agenda and supporting materials before the meeting. Assign time limits for discussion items on the agenda in order to avoid lengthy deviations from the meeting purpose. Second, make certain that clear ground rules are established for how meetings should run in the organization (e.g., no side conversations). Meetings with structure foster greater participation from attendees. Third, ,ask for feedback from meeting leaders and attendees on their overall satisfaction with meetings, the effectiveness of organizational meetings, as well as their ideas for improving the ground rules, agenda development, and attendee participation.

5. Our final recommendation is to focus on the managers and supervisors who may need some general skill development in the area of communication. For those managers who need development in this area, the shelter can assign them a mentor/coach to provide advice and counsel. Or, send these individuals to a general supervisory training program which are readily available in most communities (often through a continuing education department associated with a university). The need for training (and refresher training) on general management and communication topics is typically a high need for most. In addition to the above, managers should be encouraged to consider the following advice. First, often the best way to improve communication is by listening. By listening closely, avoiding interrupting others mid-sentence, asking clarifying questions, and repeating/summarizing what is said, confusion and misinterpretation can be avoided. Second, managers should ask employees questions and solicit their feedback to be sure communication is being understood. Third, managers and supervisors should make sure to find the time to provide feedback to their employees. Continuous positive and even negative but constructive performance feedback ensures that employees know where they stand. This is also a way of addressing issues before they become big problems.

Communication problems are continuous and need ongoing attention. The recommendations here (e.g. the Question Box, Ask me/Tell me Program, Focus on Meetings, and Communication Skill Development) are all effective methods for improving organizational communication. The improvements will be short lived, however, if old habits are allowed to return and are deeply ingrained in the organizational culture. We recommend continued reassessment of the communication components using SDS as well as occasional training refreshers on these simple interventions.

References

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