

The five key steps to engagement

For many years, the IPA has been working with organisations at all stages of developing information and consultation with employees, helping well over 200 organisations to put appropriate structures and processes in place in both unionised and non-union organisations, and providing training and support to the managers and employee representatives involved. Using our own experience and the input of organisations leading the field in this area – Avon, Egg, United Welsh, and Bank of Ireland - five key steps have been identified to effectively engage employees in consultation.

Some of the challenges faced by organisations that have set up information and consultation arrangements include:

- Why is our agenda full of the basic “tea & toilets” issues?
- Why do representatives bring us a wish list of requests from employees?
- Why do so few people stand for election?
- Why are employees disengaged from the process?
- Why are managers unwilling to participate fully?
- Why do we not see improved results from employee satisfaction surveys when they have been given a “voice”?

In many cases, organisations seem to be starting their information and consultation journey at the wrong place. Here, the agenda is employee-driven and is often focused on “hygiene” matters, such as “tea and toilets” and meetings are dominated by trivial issues which would be better raised with line managers who are better equipped to deal with them. As a result, senior managers do not see the value of



by Derek Luckhurst, training and development director, IPA

the process and quickly become disenchanted with it.

To have a more positive and strategically-minded employee voice, it is necessary to start the journey from the opposite position which is a management-driven strategic agenda based on the major changes that are affecting the workplace. In conjunction with this, the process needs representatives who will ask those questions that the employees will not think of asking, rather than simply collecting views and bringing those back to the table.

Only then can organisations take the first of five key steps that will change the employee voice from one which is interested only in trivial or individual issues to one that is interested in their organisation’s strategy.

These five key steps are as follows:

Step 1: Bring employees closer to strategic decisions made by the senior management of the business.

It is vital that every member of staff understands why key strategic decisions are taken and what thought process has gone into these decisions. This means that strategy has to form the basis of discussions at information and consultation meetings in order that the representatives can evaluate management decision-making. This will require them to ask the sorts of questions that employees will never think of asking at this stage of the

journey. These questions have to be the foundation of the high quality communication back to the employees that is essential if the process is going to be successful.

Step 2: Creating buy-in to the strategic decision.

The basis of employees buying-in to a decision that results in organisational change rests with their complete understanding of that decision, not necessarily their agreement. This requires not only an understanding of why these decisions have been made but also how they have been made. Essentially, respect for decisions comes when employees understand the process and, equally importantly, the quality of the decision. This is why Step 3 is the key to the entire process.

Step 3: The What, the Why and the What Else?

Employees are almost instinctively suspicious about what lies behind major decisions that are taken in the organisation. Only an exploration of the “what else” will overcome this and it is imperative that managers talk through the options they have considered before they reach the final decision. This will, ideally, be done before that final decision has been taken but it can be done retrospectively depending on when the consultation starts. The timing is actually of secondary importance to the quality of the communication that the representatives and managers provide to the employees. It is this regular communication that will lead to Step 4.

Step 4: Continued improvement in employee satisfaction and the building of trust.

Employees will start to feel that they are in a “safe pair of hands” over a period of time and will begin to trust their senior managers and the decisions they make. This is

Are Staff Councils failing?

Three years on and the much expected breakthrough in employee rights to be heard at work, the goal of the Information and Consultation Directive has yet to happen. Earlier this year the Directive was extended to cover smaller companies. There has been very little interest - the IPA developed an I&C toolkit and tested it with Business Link in one part of the country – so far there has been little take up. Law firms, the bellweather of what is on employers' minds, report little activity. Even the CAC has had little to do.

More importantly, those staff councils which are in place, are running into difficulties. Some are crumbling because they cannot get people to take an active part. Some limping along in the foothills of complaints and charity events. Few have captured the imagination of the senior management team enough to make that group feel that they are bringing value.

These difficulties afflict unionized and non union models alike. However they are greatest in workplaces with staff councils with little TU presence, in those sectors which the directive was most intended to benefit.

Most worrying is the credibility deficit which many councils report. Much of what they try to do is rubbished by their colleagues. Even when they can point to important achievements they get little credit.

From the union point of view one might say "I told you so". Unions were always sceptical that staff councils lacked the essential independence and clout to make management sit up and listen, seeing them as being in the gift of the company, able to be switched on and off at will. This view may be a caricature but it does contain a vital grain of truth. Staff councils have lacked sufficient standing for colleagues to believe that they can change the views of the employer.

Nowhere is this lack of independence more clearly seen than over the vexed question of communication with staff. Almost without exception, messages to staff from staff councils are vetted or indeed written by the company's internal communication team.

This has a corrosive effect on the credibility of the messages sent out. Critical comment is invariably rubbed out or softened. "Comms people" are trained to align all messages with company values and objectives. As a result opposition to redundancies, relocation or pensions cuts will be positioned within an anodyne narrative of business drivers and need for change before noting "the valuable comments of council representatives".

Until staff councils are able to decide without interference what they say to colleagues and how they say it this problem will not go away. Councils need to learn a few lessons from their union colleagues. In a redundancy situation, trade union officers may very often strike the same deal as a staff council would do. However staff seem to react differently.

Why should this be? It has to do with perceived independence. The initial response from the union after any such company announcement will invariably be hostile, if the union representative has already been privy to company plans for many months beforehand.

This stance often annoys employers who fail to grasp that such a posture is not being taken out of cussedness. Rather it is the union signalling to staff that "We are on your side in this problem". When ultimately an outcome is achieved it is sold as the best deal we can get.

Staff councils need to learn to do the same. Until a council can openly oppose a course of action when it feels it needs to, even if the employer does not like it doing so, the credibility of staff councils will always be suspect.

Discrimination Law Review

The Discrimination Law Review, launched in February 2005, has now resulted in a consultation paper which considers the opportunities for creating a clearer and more streamlined discrimination legislative framework.

The Green Paper includes proposals for a Single Equality Bill, that would put the law on equality and discrimination in one place. The focus is on the dissemination of good practice, rather than introducing legal duties to address equality issues in the workplace.

The full text of the Green Paper can be found at www.communities.gov.uk. The consultation period ends on 4 September. Comments should be sent to: Kate.Hepher@communities.gsi.gov.uk

Skills Pledge Launched

Six months after the pledge was recommended by the Leitch Review it was launched last month.

By making the Skills Pledge, employers commit to support all their employees to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and work towards a full level 2 qualification equivalent to five GCSEs A* to C.

More than 150 employers have made the Skills Pledge, covering more than 1.7 million employees.

It is not yet a legal requirement to sign up and employees will decide how and when they report progress on the pledge. Employers will have access to funding from the government's Train to Gain budget to support the staff training.

More information from www.dfes.gov.uk/skillsstrategy/

NEWS IN BRIEF

Strategic potential of internal communication yet to be tapped

Research for the Work Foundation challenges top teams and senior decision makers to recognise the potential of internal communications (IC) to drive up the cohesion and performance of organisations.

The study of 596 large, mostly multi-site organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors, finds that IC departments are working increasingly closely with chief executives, focussing their efforts on helping staff engage with the business they work in. The highest performing organisations use IC both for

downwards and upwards communication – a capacity that is not widely shared across organisations.

Dr Michelle Mahdon, co-author of the report, said: 'Communicating effectively inside organisations is a central performance and productivity issue. On the shoulders of the IC function rests the heavy burden of ensuring the strategic direction of an organisation is known, understood and, above all, acted on.'

Get it right and the result is increased engagement and productivity, with employees

performing the role of ambassadors for the brand."

The report, argues IC professionals need to connect better with line managers, and not seek to bypass them by dealing directly with staff. It follows previous research from The Work Foundation that found internal communications was one of the 'intangible factors' of production which organisations need to orchestrate to generate long-term success.

More information from www.theworkfoundation.com

Unionlearn celebrates its first birthday.

TUC's unionlearn is now one year old and is celebrating a 50% increase in union learners. There are now 18,000 union learning representatives (previously 15,000) who have supported over 150,000 people to access courses, an increase of 50% on last year.

A report published last month by unionlearn, and commissioned from Leeds University Business School, showed that the process of establishing a learning agreement enhanced relationships between unions and management by improving trust.

The case study-based research, titled *A Qualitative Study of Workplace Learning Agreements*, also highlighted that learning agreements contribute to the sustainability of learning partnerships and embed trade union involvement.

More information from www.unionlearn.org.uk.

Flexible Working – The Challenges

A report by the Orange Future Enterprise Coalition has identified the main challenges facing employers and employees in dealing with flexible working practices.

Following a survey of over 1,440 workers, the research found that over half of the working population already have some sort of flexible working arrangements, but nearly a quarter have no formal agreement with their employer about how they do this.

The research identified a number of benefits for the business and the employee, but also highlights some key challenges, for example:

- flexible working arrangements can be perceived as 'inaccessible' and 'unfair' by other employees
- part-time workers with reduced hours often have to work extensive unpaid overtime to complete their responsibilities
- adopting a laissez faire style of flexibility can cause problems if it is not carefully monitored and evaluated
- a transparent rationale for flexible working is needed to avoid confusion or perceptions of unfairness between employees.

For more information about the report titled "Beyond Boundaries" go to: www.orangecoalition.com.

UK employers need to prepare for an ageing workforce

According to recent research by Aon Consulting, 78% of employees anticipate working beyond the age of 65 years.

Currently, an estimated one million employees are working past the state pension age, but this is expected to treble among those aged 65 to 70 years by 2017, says the research. The report also found that a quarter of respondents would carry on working past the official retirement age simply because they wanted to, whereas 53% believe it will be necessary to increase their pension.

Jon Beaumont, HR consultant at Aon, said: "An ageing workforce is inevitable with an estimated three million people likely to be working beyond their retirement age within 10 years time. This could be a huge benefit to organisations, so long as the key challenges are tackled sooner rather than later. Businesses used to think that older workers could not drive companies forward but this old fashioned attitude needs to shift.

"Effective performance management will be the key discipline in making an ageing workforce into a competitive advantage."

More information about the research from www.employeebenefits.co.uk

More information about the IPA's consultancy and training services relating to Age Diversity from www.ipa-involve.com or Derek.Luckhurst@ipa-involve.com or on 020 7354 8040

closely linked to employees feeling valued and having confidence in the way decisions are made. There is also comfort in the predictability of knowing they will be involved and that the decision-making process is not clouded in secrecy. It creates a culture of "no surprises", not in the assumption that every decision will produce good news, but in employees knowing that managers go through a difficult process when they make decisions and, even though it may result in a tough decision being made, employees will know that it has not been taken lightly and their views have been considered.

Step 5: Create a positive and credible employee voice in a culture where employees want to contribute and get involved. If the consultation process properly addresses any cultural problem by following the previous four steps, cynicism and rumour-mongering will be reduced. It is within such a fresh, positive culture that employees will be interested in and talking about organisational strategy. They will stop speculating about why something has happened and will be more interested in debating what might happen next. They will also tend to score key questions very highly in employee satisfaction surveys and more employees will actually fill them in. More employees will also want to stand as representatives and subsequent elections will keep the process of information and consultation topical.

These five key steps reveal why so many organisations have struggled to get employees engaged with an information and consultation process and why so many employees see that process as ineffective. Many have tried to start the process at Step 5 by setting up a simplistic "backwards and forwards" communication between the employees and the representatives with the latter bringing forward the wish lists of the former. To create the culture or environment where more people want to stand for election to a forum than there are places, the organisation has to work through the key steps in order. There is no short cut. This reduces the importance of "quick wins" but it sharply increases the need to manage the expectations of the employees, particularly in terms of how quickly they will notice the measurable benefits.

Underpinned by the use of the IPA's Option-Based Consultation Model, some organisations have achieved this culture change as the IPA case studies of Egg and United Welsh clearly illustrate. The outcomes have been as popular with managers as with the employees - producing employee engagement on a level that is rare. These benefits have not been achieved simply by a process but have been part of a consistent and determined effort underpinned by a set of skills and behaviours specifically developed to deliver the cultural change.

Despite the number of success stories, the concept can be a

difficult proposition to take on board. Some managers have been cautious regarding the discussion of other options considered. This can be because of concern over the confidential nature of the information but it can also be a fear that the representatives are trying to "catch them out" in some way or are actively looking for gaps in the thought process. This is not the intention and once managers have understood that, respect and trust for them grows as a direct result of informing employees of these options. Once the managers are committed, the organisation will be well on its way through the five-step journey.

It is not an easy journey, as Egg, Bank of Ireland, Avon and United Welsh will all testify, but these organisations are now reaping the benefits and competitive advantage of their commitment to real employee engagement. The IPA is now providing training and support to organisations setting up an employee forum for the first time. These organisations are benefiting from the experiences that have led to the development of the five step process. Those organisations with forums still discussing "tea and toilets" and the Christmas party will need to rise to the challenge or be left behind.

For more information and IPA case studies visit: www.ipa-involve.com

Changes to the IPA Bulletin

From September 2007, we will be sending the IPA Bulletin by email in PDF format. We are currently updating our records, and to make sure you continue to receive your copy of the Bulletin please send your email address to lorraine.modeste@ipa-involve.com.

For more information about all IPA services - visit www.ipa-involve.com



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