Course Learning Outcomes for Unit IV

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

3. Explain communication techniques that improve employee trust and engagement.

Reading Assignment

In order to access the following resource(s), click the link(s) below:


Click here to view the Unit IV Presentation.  
Click here to view the Unit IV Presentation transcript.

Unit Lesson

Introduction

According to Henry Mintzberg (2010), managers engage in multiple functions throughout the workday. Within the organization, managers need to collect and convey information, make decisions, and promote unity. All of these functions are carried out through communication. Mintzberg (2010) explains that managers have an image of themselves as decision-makers, but their jobs entail much more. Managers have to balance roles as facilitators and analysts. They also have to create an effective corporate culture.
Managers collect information through conversation, reports, memos, phone calls, meetings, e-mail messages, speeches, and videos, and managers distribute the information along the same channels. Effective managers utilize a wide variety of media and strategies to communicate. As Mintzberg (2010) explains, managers need to listen to employees at all levels of the organization, build a strong group with people who care about the company and its core values, and encourage employees to be innovative.

In “Talk Nerdy to Me: The Role of Intellectual Stimulation in the Supervisor-Employee Relationship,” Smothers, Doleh, Celuch, Peluchette, and Valadares (2016) describe how vital it is for managers to employ communication techniques that improve employee performance. If the employees trust the managers—if the communication fosters engagement—then job performance and the psychological well-being of the employees will increase. The authors stress communication transparency and leader integrity as key points.

Galip Erdil and Cem Tanova (2015) focus on employee perception of trust and how managers communicate in “Do Birds of a Feather Communicate Better? The Cognitive Style Congruence Between Managers and Their Employees and Communication Satisfaction.” The extent to which employees feel that their managers listen to them and respect their opinions influences the employees’ feelings of trust toward the organization. The style that the managers use to communicate to the employees makes a difference in comprehension.

In all three articles, certain core ideas are highlighted: communication, trust, and employee engagement. But, how do all of these concepts work together? The focus of this unit will be an in-depth examination of the communication techniques managers in an organization can use to improve employee trust and engagement. In this unit, we will be revisiting terms and ideas first discussed in Unit I and in Unit II. It may be helpful to review the information.

Organizing Information to Fit the Audience, the Purpose, and the Situation

In Unit I, the lesson focused on the sender, the channel, and the receiver. The Unit I graphic showed that the interaction moved in a straight line. In the units that followed, concepts of feedback were introduced. The graphic no longer moved in a straight line but, rather, looped back onto itself as the sender “received” information from his or her audience after the message had traveled along the channel.

But, there is yet another step in the process—audience analysis. When added to a graphic, it would appear as shown below:
Audience Analysis

Preparation is required to effectively communicate messages to employees so they understand the reasons for a decision and also grasp how it affects them. In the very first step of any type of communication, the sender of the message needs to focus on who will be receiving his or her words. This type of consideration should occur for both written and verbal communication forms. Some experts feel that this step needs to occur even before the sender forms the idea for the message; other experts believe this should happen concurrently. In part, this depends on the sender’s perspective toward the receivers; how essential is it to know information about the employees in the organization? Mintzberg (2010) believes that managers should focus first on the people involved. It is a more nuanced approach than beginning with the information and requires reflection prior to action (sending the message). Erdil and Tanova (2015) feel it is essential that the sender be aware of the receiver’s cognitive style. Acknowledging the way the receiver processes information will improve satisfaction with the communication process. This will also help to build a constructive relationship between the two parties. Being proactive rather than reactive in this regard will help to improve communication and establish a more productive relationship with the employees in an organization.

The sender needs to transcend his or her own perspective and consider the needs/interests of the audience; then, the sender should decide how to account for this in the message. Certain questions, such as those listed below, can assist in this step:

1. Which employees make up the audience? The message could be constructed differently for executives and technicians, for example.
2. If the message needs to be delivered to more than one person, how do the people in the audience differ? The sender has to account for diverse needs of his or her audience. In a written document, for example, the sender may write separate sections that address the needs of the different audiences.
3. What factors impact the way the audience feels about the subject? There are factors outside of the sender’s control; such as recent news reports, the economy, and even the weather that may influence the way the message is received. All of these aspects affect the message and need to be considered when the sender constructs it.

Purpose Analysis

What is the purpose in sending the message? What does the message need to accomplish to serve the organizational problem? What do the readers/listeners need to do? Planning the purpose of the message helps to create focus on the part of the sender. Even a simple message may have several related purposes.

What information needs to be included in the message? Plan by creating a list of necessary points. Determine what reasons or benefits the audience will find convincing. The message may first originate with the sender, but feedback from the audience can often alter the information and the subsequent message(s).

Case Study: Being a “Best Place to Work”

In “Communication Provides Foundation for Being a Best Place to Work,” Kathleen Skidmore-Williams (2013) describes the working conditions of federal agencies in recent times. Federal workers face negative aspects such as pay freezes, hiring freezes, no awards, sequestration, the year-to-year threat of plunging over the fiscal cliff, and government shutdowns. In 2013, the overall job satisfaction for federal agencies that participated in the Partnership for Public Service Survey was 60.8 %. However, the U.S. Army Audit Agency had the highest score for job satisfaction among employees at 87.5 %. Employees consider it one of the best places to work in the federal government (Skidmore-Williams, 2013, p. 52).

What sets the agency apart from the others? Auditor General Randall L. Exley explains that the U.S. Army Audit Agency has made communication a top priority for the organization (as cited in Skidmore-Williams, 2013). He believes that information and transparency helps to build trust in an organization, which leads to a happier workforce. Clear, concise, and open communication will increase productivity (Skidmore-Williams, 2013).

During the course of the year, Exley and his executive team have on-site visits to field offices, and they conduct group meetings with staff members and with supervisors (Skidmore-Williams, 2013). Regarding the years when the overall job satisfaction was low, staff members routinely expressed concerns about being excluded from the decision-making process for their audits. Some staff felt that the supervisors did not trust
them to perform their duties because of micromanagement. Other staff stated frustration with the inconsistency of management practices.

After gathering information, Exley decided that effective and open communication between staff and managers would improve the situation (Skidmore-Williams, 2013). His first step was not to form an idea but to gather information about his audience and to analyze it. This preparation allowed him to focus on the people involved and, eventually, gave him the opportunity to craft his message so that it met the needs of his audience.

For Exley, there were two different types of audience members—staff and supervisors—and he had to address the needs of both in his message. He and his management team developed a plan to gather information and to utilize it. They created a short, anonymous survey for agency staff that collected data on current communication issues in the organization. Exley and his management team then hired a contractor to create two-day workshops for managers at the various field offices that took these surveys into consideration (Skidmore-Williams, 2013).

In the article, Exley explains that the workshops were designed to improve communication and candor between managers and to address the staff concerns (as cited in Skidmore-Williams, 2013). The managers who attended the workshops were expected to develop their skill levels. When they returned, the managers then needed to coach their teams in the principles of good communication (Skidmore-Williams, 2013).

Exley sent an agency-wide message announcing the workshops. He explained that the workshops were not targeted toward the mistakes of a few but had been designed to improve everyone’s ability to communicate. The workshops were mandatory for everyone—including the auditor general (Skidmore-Williams, 2013). The agency-wide message helped to establish transparency in the process right from the start.

To distribute the information, the management team created a communication best-practices handbook for the supervisors and staff. The organization formed a Strategic Communications Branch. To build support, Principal Deputy Auditor General Joseph Mixxoni, the second-in-command of the U.S. Army Audit Agency, makes sure that staff members are asked what they need to accomplish their mission and to feel like an important member of the team. They are also asked the best channel to use to get them that information (Skidmore-Williams, 2013). Exley uses multiple channels, such as blog posts, e-mail, and town hall meetings, to foster effective communication (Skidmore-Williams, 2013).

Exley’s message to improve communication worked. Within the agency, there is an increased frequency of communication between staff and supervisors. The quality of the communication has improved as well. Staff reports indicate that the employees feel empowered; the supervisors are listening to their ideas (as cited in Skidmore-Williams, 2013). At the same time, supervisors are imparting the communication principles they have learned through the workshops to the staff at topic team meetings or office “lunch and learn” sessions.

One agency staff member summarizes the results by stressing the fact that the leadership now listens to the concerns of the staff and also takes action on those concerns. This is meaningful. The staff also appreciates the multiple channels of communication that are now available; including the auditor general’s blogs, the workshops, and the human capital plan (Skidmore-Williams, 2013, p. 56). This has led to the agency being one of the best places to work year after year.

References


Skidmore-Williams, K. (2013). Communication provides foundation for being a best place to work. Public Manager, 42(2), 52-56.

**Learning Activities (Non-Graded)**

**Apply What You Have Learned**

Consider organizations where you have worked in the past or where you are currently employed. Have you encountered any situations where it was difficult to communicate with a supervisor? If so, how did this affect your working environment and job performance?

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.