

Mortgage Industry Employment



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Nourishing Employees All Year Round

By Kerry Elam

Many times, we find our corporate culture is in a rut, following the well-worn path of similar programs from year to year. To keep employees engaged and motivated, it is vital to review programs, technologies, processes, procedures and benefits annually—and modify them as needed. Yet internal

operations will not be effective conducting these reviews in a vacuum; they must focus on open communication to gauge the pulse of employees. As General Colin Powell said, "The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them."

Open communication

In order to understand the needs and desires of our employees, we need to provide a healthy, welcoming culture in which employees feel safe enough to be honest. Knowing how to offer space and communicate effectively, without offending others, is an essential competency for all members of a firm, at all levels, starting with management. The most effective organizations lead by example. When delicate situations are brought to management, how they are handled is a strong message to others, either encouraging or discouraging them from expressing openly. We all want to be thoroughly heard with compassion, and leaders must show us how it's done.

How can an organization be successful in creating a culture in which employees feel safe to speak truthfully? The first step is to instill accountability in all scenarios. As the managing director of human resources and operations, I consistently reiterate, "I want to understand what is going on, yet remember we all play a role in the situation. What is your role; how are you accountable?" I then remind the individual that we do not tolerate blaming in our firm as we all play a part in each situation. This may sound harsh, yet over the last 10 plus years, it has worked time and time again.

The second step is to meet conflict head on and face-to-face when possible. If you are part of the situation, suggest that everyone involved meet in person or via conference call. In a recent scenario at Actualize Consulting, we had a team divided in discord. We needed to reestablish open, trusting communication, so we used a technique inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's "Watering Flowers" exercise of three simple prompts:

1. What are you grateful for? By starting with gratitude, the vibe immediately shifted from negative to positive. Each person shared gratitude after gratitude, which contagiously spread, opening the space for interpersonal connection as the team erupted into laughter.

2. What do you regret? As we moved to regret, the mood sobered, yet each person who had a regret was still able to sincerely apologize to those impacted. Forgiveness came quickly, showing that a simple apology goes a long way. For instance, one team member expressed regret for not checking his work, causing another team member to stay up all night correcting the error. Before this, the "all-nighter" team member had not known whether anyone really appreciated his sacrifice of a night's sleep. He was content with simply being seen, and readily accepted the apology.

3. How were your feelings hurt? By the time we reached this question, all team members were feeling compassion among the team and many complaints that had been voiced before did not surface. The genuine conversations around regrets had satisfied the majority of the hurt feelings. Team members expressed the few remaining hurt feelings with intentional consideration and in pure honesty.

In most cases, taking the time to ensure all parties are heard is enough to move forward in a positive light. Below are some additional suggestions on managing and resolving conflict at any level in the organization.

- **Shut down gossip:** If someone starts speaking about a co-worker, do not participate, divert the conversation to a positive.
- **Seek resolution:** By guiding understanding, agreement and consensus.
- **Listen fully:** Often the person speaking will resolve their own issue if given the opportunity to vent to a kind ear.

There are no guarantees that your communication efforts will be met with total compliance and agreement. However, as long as you genuinely strive to understand each other, and are cordial and respectful, you can still have a successful exchange. In today's highly informational and technological

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environment, spoken communication is more important than ever. Pick up the phone or meet in-person as often as possible for more rewarding relationships and bonds.

Effective internal operations

While communication is vital, how the company is functioning and the benefits we offer our employees also impact longer-term retention. By consistently reviewing the company's inner workings, asking for feedback and implementing change, we show the willingness to be our best and honor a culture of continuous improvement. The list below provides thought provoking prompts to use in reviewing your firm's operations.

- **When was the last time you had a new insurance broker analyze**

your current insurance plan? We had not reviewed our insurance in detail for years, and when a new broker bid for our business, we discovered significant cost savings with increased employee benefits.

- **Is your goal setting and review process effective and efficient?** Last year, we streamlined our process with three focus areas (Aspire, Accountability and Acumen), yet we were still using a cumbersome workflow. For 2016, we removed the workflow altogether by instead using our Dropbox folders with one spreadsheet with appropriate access permissions. We are saving \$4,000 annually with this small change!
- **How often do you survey your employees?** We have found that surveys throughout the year ensure that we know what our employees

desire, from what types of social events to hold to how we can improve our benefits to employees. With this knowledge we can make efficient, meaningful, and cost-effective changes.

- **What retention programs do you offer?** Consider a program such as a profit sharing plan, which most 401k providers will offer at no charge. The program benefits include additional tax deduction, vesting schedule for retention and more flexibility than 401k (you set the parameters for inclusion, whereas 401k plans require you to offer the same benefit to each employee).
- **What enhancements can you make to your vacation policy?** Our more tenured employees were thrilled with the addition of more floating holidays based on years of service.

In closing, effective communication skills—whether in dealing with a challenge or announcing an organizational change—foster success in life, work and relationships. Internal operations based on intentional communication and a willingness to change lead to an open, vibrant corporate culture that more easily fuels ongoing success. By focusing on compassionate and continuous communication, we can more accurately know our employees, quickly come to resolutions, and build a firm that nourishes our employees all year long.

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