

Strategies to guide employees through the seas of change

by Mark Schumann and Sandra O'Neal - ABOUT THE AUTHORS MARK SCHUMANN, principal and global communication . practice leader for Towers Perrin, and Sandra O'Neal, CCP, Director & Managing Principal, Towers Perrin, explained to attendees at this year's WorldatWork conference (San Diego, Calif.)

CHANGE CONTINUES TO BE THE WATCHWORD, even if employees are just plain tired of hearing it. Savvy managers must be ready with communications strategies that soothe the savage beast and offer hope for better times to come.

- **Careers.** Employees now average six employers in a career, and that is accelerating.
- **Compensation.** "It is more focused, more differentiated, more dependent on employee accountability," said O'Neal.
- **What people consider rewarding.** "Learning and development, work environment, and organizational values are key priorities now," said Schumann.
- **The stakes are higher** for organisations, Schumann continued. "And people are scared," especially employees *who* came into the workforce in the 1990s —"they never saw bad times, until recently."
- **Changes are looming** for everyone. Employees want answers to the question, "What happens to me," said Schumann. In today's environment, "this [is what] they care about."
- **Cynicism** and distrust are rampant. Reports of CEO pillage leaving employees without jobs or retirement funds leave employees wondering if it could happen to them as well.

What to do? Schumann and O'Neal also offered a 10-step guide for communicating well during this period

of turmoil.

Here are each step and selected highlights from their presentations:

Step 1: Picture the end state you need to reach - You need a clear picture of where your organisation is now as well as where you want to be so you can plot your course to your goal. You should have a clear picture of the specific behaviour and contributions needed from employees and specific metrics to prove the success of your communication approach. Keep in mind what you can influence and what you can control, Schumann warns. Consider the people employees listen to and figure out how to influence them.

Step 2: Build the basics into every communication - O'Neal suggests this model:

- **Conduct** research. Assess the current state of employee behavior and perceptions.
- **Align** stakeholders. This includes managing potential risk by shoring up support 'behind the scenes' in advance.
- **Craft** the story. Create a compelling story for your proposed change, and deliver it through the 'innovative use of multiple channels.' *Key:* Use as few words as possible, because 'people are cramped.'
- **Engage** employees. Create a two-way communication by

involving employees

- **Measure impact.** Again, establish metrics (and methods of measuring metrics) regarding behaviour and perceptions to gauge how well you're doing.

Step 3: Balance the priorities in the message - You need to align the top business priorities of your company with the priorities of your employees. While management may be preoccupied with improving operating performance or reducing costs, your employees are more likely to be preoccupied with the implications of change on their lives – and it behoves you to address them.

Step 4: Communicate to actions and reactions - You need to move employees beyond mere understanding of the initiative, towards believing in the change and supporting it.

Step 5: Pursue distinct audience segments -

Not everyone responds equally to the same communications. Consider these five employee types:

- *Eternal optimists*, or those rare employees who think, "I trust the company, so this approach to rewards must be right"; in denials, who think, "This doesn't really affect me, yet, so I don't need to pay attention";
- *Underdogs*, who think, "We need to do what we need to do so we can compete as a company," followed by, "What's going to happen next? Poor me";
- *Passive-aggressives*, who think, "I don't like this, but I've been here so long, I wouldn't know how to start looking for a job"; and
- *Pessimists*, or those employees who think, "Forget it. I didn't sign up for this deal. Nothing will make me like it."

Step 6: Balance high tech with high touch - When much of your communications moves online, you neglect the human, 'high touch' side of this equation at your peril, especially now. As Schumann observed, the "demand for high touch is beyond anything I can remember. Employees like the Web but want to hear from people via meetings, presentations," and the like.

Step 7: Measure communication results - For examples of how companies are doing this, Schumann offered findings from the Towers Perrin/International Association of Business Communicators (IABC; www.iabc.com) Future Trends study

The measures used include: performance against objectives, changes in behaviour, audience perception of communication's effectiveness, understanding of the topic/ program, value of communication (cost/benefit), image in the marketplace, brand awareness, employee/customer/investor commitment, and increased trust in leadership.

The methods used to measure include: focus groups, paper surveys, pre- and post-assessments of behaviours, interviews, electronic surveys, and informal discussions.

Schumann cautioned attendees that while respondents say they are taking these actions, "they aren't necessarily doing it."

Step 8: Think content and access

Content: "Reach beyond the simple facts of rewards to address the personal impact" of what you're doing.

Access: Don't limit your tools to those available in the workplace; also make your information available to employees – and their families – during off-hours.

Step 9: Remember the fundamental

rules

Like communication . "No news' is simply 'no news.' Goodwill is not created in a vacuum and speed is everything." said O'Neal. "People must believe the reasons why before they will listen to the details of what and when."

Step 10: Consider your role

Get ready. Successful managers must be visionaries, owners, cheerleaders for the business case, implementation managers, organisational facilitators, change agents, collaboration agents, and the organisational conscience.

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