

Communication

Bulletin TM for Managers & Supervisors

A fast-read source of information to help managers communicate better within and between departments, twice a month.

June 1, 2020



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www.CommunicationBulletin.com



Management Skills Center

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Hundreds of tips to get writing right

Off-site but not out of mind: 3 team strategies that work

Unique ways leaders keep employees engaged and motivated

One are the days of pizza parties and team-building activities (at least temporarily).

In are the days of engaging and motivating employees remotely or at a distance.

Fortunately, leaders don't have to reinvent the wheel to keep employees motivated when they aren't together.

"If you build the right culture, you can rely on what you already did well," says Howard Spector, CEO of SimplePractice, an electronic health record and practice management software provider. "Start by taking good care of your employees and you can continue to do that under any circumstances."

Here are innovative ways three companies

have been able to keep employees engaged remotely and onsite throughout the coronavirus crisis. Even better, these ideas will continue to work beyond challenging times.

Balance wellness with fun

At SimplePractice, they tweaked some traditions and added other motivators appropriate to the times.

First, to make sure everyone would be comfortable at home, they safely gave employees time and space to get in the office to grab their chairs and anything else that made their workspace comfortable.

From there, Spector wanted to make sure

Please see Strategies ... on Page 2.

Sharpen Your Judgment

Do extra duties make staffer eligible for OT?

"I wanted to check in with you to find out how everything's going," said Ellen. "I know you have a lot on your plate."

Alice straightened a stack of papers and stood up. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that."

Back in Ellen's office, Alice took a deep breath. "I've been working late every night just to keep up with all the paperwork."

"I know," Ellen replied. "It's not going unnoticed. Unfortunately, the company's had a tough run recently, and we can't afford to replace Jeff. I need you to hang in there."

"Here's the thing," Alice said. "Jeff was an hourly worker. If he stayed late, he got paid overtime. I'm salaried because my job is

supposed to involve higher-level responsibilities. But now I'm doing all Jeff's work, too. Shouldn't I get overtime?"

"But you're getting paid more than Jeff did," Ellen pointed out.

"Not much more – if I factor in all the extra hours I'm working," Alice said.

Does the law protect worker?

The company refused to pay Alice overtime, and she sued under the Fair Labor Standards Act. Alice claimed because her work duties had changed, she was no longer exempt from the law's overtime provisions.

The company fought the case. Did it win?

This regular feature sharpens your thinking and helps keep both you and your firm out of trouble. It describes a real legal conflict and lets you judge the outcome.

Make your decision, then please turn to Page 4 for the court's ruling.

The Purpose of Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors

Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors provides relevant and actionable business ideas to help managers and supervisors improve communication and increase effectiveness.

The Bulletin helps improve communication within and between departments, a major goal for most businesses seeking better performance.

All in a fast-read format, twice a month.

Strategies ...

(continued from Page 1)

his employees had access to physical wellness when the company gym and their local gyms were closed.

So he partnered with a fitness app (Alo Moves) to provide classes to all employees to keep them healthy.

They also hired a mindfulness coach to help employees meditate and handle new stressors at their convenience.

On the fun side of things, they set up a tele-lunch. Anyone who wants to have lunch with colleagues – like they did onsite – could get in on a daily lunchtime Zoom call.

To celebrate good stuff, SimplePractice sets up a weekly Zoom room Happy Hour on Fridays in place of their monthly Happy Birthday Hour.

Send messages from the top

Clint Smith, president of CareerPlug, a recruiting software company, launched a COVID-19 communication campaign when all of his employees went home to work.

It's meant to motivate, inspire and build business transparency.

Every day he meets remotely with the team, starting with a motivational message to help them keep a positive

mindset and focus on what they can control.

Then he tackles the business end, which he doesn't sugarcoat. He gives updates on the financial impact the pandemic has had on the company and what he's doing to avoid layoffs and keep the company afloat. Transparency helps build employee loyalty.

Ask employees to solve problems

At Homes.com in Virginia, President Dave Mele and Senior VP Erin Ruane asked employees to build a plan that would help the team stay productive, give support and maintain morale as many worked from home.

They came up with these ideas:

- positive #WorkFromHomes Daily Dose messages
- photos and video tours, so employees could show each other their new workspaces
- daily Orange Alerts when colleagues praise project completions and other achievements
- Parent Panels on topics such as working efficiently with kids at home
- weekly update videos with company news and pep talks, and
- a Spirit Week.

Sources: Howard Spector, *SimplePractice.com*; *AmericanExpress*, tinyurl.com/lamexp477; Dave Mele and Erin Ruane, *Homes.com*

TECH CORNER

'What did that email mean?' Don't set the wrong tone

Misreading emotions is incredibly easy in emails. Maybe you've learned this the hard way!

It's easy to say, "Stop being so sensitive!" but you're better off being careful in email to prevent folks from taking a message the wrong way.

Put yourself in their shoes

Here are a few tips to stop this from happening:

- **Imagine how it will be read.** When you send an email to a staffer or employees, for example, he or she is

likely to view it as negative because you're higher in power. So put yourself in the person's shoes and ask before you send: How will this sound to the person reading it?

- **Be clear about emotions.** The easiest way to avoid mix-ups is to simply spell out emotions. For example: "I'm sorry we didn't handle this work order quickly enough. We'll get started on it ASAP." Being more direct can take out the guesswork.
- **End it nicely.** A final line saying "Thanks for following up" or "Please let me know the result" ends the message on a positive note and tells the recipient it's a cordial business communication.

COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

■ Sick of Zoom? 3 ways to beat remote meeting fatigue

Some people are so drained by Zoom meetings these days they're turning down the online happy hours!

Remote, online meetings are a drain because people:

- rely solely on conversation to absorb information (no side whispers to colleagues to clarify or catch up)
- multitask (email, daydream, web search) and lose focus, and
- are distracted by life around them.

To combat Zoom fatigue:

- **Avoid multitasking.** Leaders want to ask everyone to do the same.
- **Take mini breaks.** On longer calls, minimize the screen or gaze out a window for a few seconds.
- **Mix it up.** Pick up the phone to pound things out or make final decisions.

Source: HBR, tinyurl.com/zoom477

■ 8 words you might not be using right

If you haven't realized it by now, you should know: Spell-check doesn't fix grammar mistakes – especially these that are so easy to make at work:

- **Compliment vs. complement.** Compliment is to praise. Complement is to complete or make whole. *Sheila complimented Drew. His yellow tie complemented the blue shirt.*
- **Home in vs. hone in.** Home in is direct attention to. Hone in is to sharpen. *Let's home in on last quarter's first-purchase results. It proves the team honed in on qualifying buyers.*
- **Fewer vs. less.** Fewer is correct when the count is quantifiable. Less is correct when the count is on degree or amount. *Make less iced tea because we'll have fewer people at the meeting.*
- **Imply vs. infer.** Imply is a hint or slight directive. Infer is drawing a conclusion. *He implied we meet and reassess our data before we infer the company is a sinking ship.*

Real Problems, Real Solutions

Our subscribers come from a broad range of organizations, large and small. In this regular networking feature, three of them share their successes in improving workplace communication.

1 Ask employees to fix problems that matter

A lot of our employees had to start working remotely, doing jobs across the gamut. We wanted to keep them engaged in the company's success when it wasn't business as usual.

Out of need, and to increase engagement, we asked employees to help solve problems – problems that mattered immediately to the company and its customers.

Removed the red tape

We asked teams to come up with ideas on how to ship critical goods, improve our supply chains and help our business partners stay afloat.

The important part – that kept employees motivated and engaged – is we removed any red tape that existed (there wasn't much to start).

Employees didn't have to go through a process to share ideas. We simply asked them to look at what the leaders faced – plus other problems they identified – and offer solutions.

It kept them creative and engaged – and helped us resolve some issues.

(Leaders at Flexport, a global logistics company, shared this success on Harvard Business Review, tinyurl.com/HBR477)

2 How to get job candidates to open up

Interviewing job candidates is tricky. Some people have practiced their pitch so well, it's hard to tell what they're really like.

I've learned to disarm candidates so they drop the act.

Let's have a real talk

The key to helping people open up is simple: Get them talking.

I ask questions they're comfortable answering, so they don't feel as if they're on the hot seat.

For example, I'll dig for details about what they liked – or disliked – at a previous job or experience.

Eventually, they lose the feeling they're being questioned and open up.

Then I get a better idea if the candidate will be a good fit.

It takes time, but not compared to making the wrong hiring choice.

Over the years, this approach helped me hire a much greater percentage of employees who were a strong fit.

(Carl Lay, VP, Human Resource Management Professionals, Elizabethtown, KY)

3 Tough to delegate tasks? Try this step

In the past, I struggled to delegate tasks clearly.

I'd ask employees to handle something, and they'd do it. But they didn't follow up or consider the job their responsibility.

They saw everything as my job – they were just pitching in to help.

I needed to make it clear who was in charge of what.

It takes a little time but works

To eliminate any doubt, I wrote checklists for each job, outlining exactly what employees needed to do.

For example, I put someone in charge of checking for safety hazards and repair issues.

We also started meeting regularly to talk about new problems that came up week to week.

The new system makes a huge difference. Now everyone knows what they're supposed to do, and they don't expect me to handle it all.

(Angela Policano, Director & Owner, Clarksburg Beauty Academy, Clarksburg, WV)



YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ Staff can come back after virus – but don't want to

Question: We got the OK from our government leaders to bring employees back to work. But some say they're still afraid of the coronavirus. Can we insist they come back?

Answer: Yes, but you want to go forward with caution similar to theirs, says Angela Walker, an employment law attorney with Blanchard Walker.

Fear isn't a legal reason for refusing to return to work, Walker says. But there's an exception – diagnosed mental-health disability, such as severe anxiety. And if an employee is diagnosed with severe anxiety, the coronavirus could very likely exacerbate the disability.

In that case, you'll want to work with employees to find a reasonable accommodation under the American with Disabilities Act, such as continuing to work from home.

Sources: Wall Street Journal, tinyurl.com/return477 and bwlawonline.com

LIGHTER SIDE

■ Breakfast and giggles lead to good day at work

A good breakfast can boost employee performance by 20%, one study found. A good laugh will help, too.

Put the two together, and today might be the most productive day ever.

- A new study finds that sausages are often linked to other sausages – @donni
- A frittata is just an omelet that studied abroad for a year in college – @jenstatsky
- My wife was going to make pancakes. Then she wasn't. Then she was. Then she wasn't. Then she was. Now it looks like she's just waffling – @KentWGraham

Sources: tinyurl.com/breakfast475 and RD.com

COMMUNICATION NEWS

The dangers of overinflating feedback

Beware managers: Many of you unknowingly sugarcoat negative feedback, according to research from Harvard Business School.

That causes a big issue: Low performers think they're doing OK. Then, when you must discipline or terminate them, they're surprised, angry and possibly lawsuit-bound.

Illusion of transparency

Researchers call the problem an *illusion of transparency*: Managers worry about their own feelings and intentions (e.g., "I don't want to be a jerk" or "I want her to walk away still liking me"). Then they lose sight of

the intent (to pinpoint poor performance and help employees improve). In this situation, managers use vague language that doesn't convey the right magnitude of the behavior.

Here's how you can avoid the dangers:

- **Talk more often.** Give feedback weekly or monthly to build a relationship where you're both comfortable talking candidly.
- **Be clear.** Give specific details – time, place, effects on others – of behavior that needs to change. Say exactly what you expect now.
- **Ask employees to paraphrase** the issue, solution and expectation.

Source: HBR, tinyurl.com/feedback477

What do team members help prevent? Give the team examples

Next time you publicly congratulate staffers for a job well done, don't just focus on what they did.

Take a minute to talk about what they helped prevent.

Example: "If it weren't for Fred, we could've had major problems with the production machinery. He saw there was a problem with ..."

Or: "Lisa helped us keep a longtime customer on board. The customer was ticked off and gave Lisa an earful on the phone.

But instead of getting upset, Lisa allowed the customer to let off steam ..."

Little wins add up to big victory

These acknowledgments help your team members gain a few extra pats on the back from co-workers.

You also get the message across that paying attention to details or going the extra mile for customer service makes your organization one that people want to do business with – which is especially important in tough times.

Quotes

Do more than is required. What is the distance between someone who achieves their goals consistently and those who spend their lives and careers merely following? The extra mile.

– Gary Ryan Blair

When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too.

– Paulo Coelho

Don't wish it were easier. Wish you were better.

– Jim Rohn

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Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

Yes, the company won.

Alice was exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) overtime rules because she met the administrative exemption.

To meet the requirements of the exemption, employees must perform jobs "without specific instructions or procedures." In addition, they must "be delegated authority regarding matters of significance."

While Alice did handle tasks that met those requirements, she'd also taken on other duties that didn't. In fact, she claimed she only spent 20% of her time on high-level tasks, and the rest was spent on routine low-level paperwork.

As a result, she claimed she shouldn't be

"exempt" – and should get overtime.

But in this case, the court ruled the term "primary duty" meant the most important duty – not the one she spent the most time on.

FLSA lawsuits bedeviling employers

Lawsuits over the FLSA have skyrocketed in recent years. In this case, the company won. But it could have easily gone the other way.

If an employee complains about his or her pay under FLSA, talk to HR or a company lawyer to make sure you're in compliance.

(Based on *Altemus v. Fed. Realty Inv. Trust*. Dramatized for effect.)