

Communication

Bulletin TM for Managers & Supervisors

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

March 14, 2022



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Staff wants flexibility? 4 ways to do it without losing productivity

You'll likely win employees' love when you become the flexible leader

Flexibility is almost a cliché in the work world these days.

Everyone wants more flexibility after being forced home during the pandemic. Some employees even demand it or they'll quit.

But leaders aren't as quick to bend on policies as they were in the throes of the pandemic. Many are afraid flexible work is equivalent to less work.

"Flexibility has tremendous benefits for employees, including reduced burnout and greater job satisfaction," Margaret Luciano, associate professor of management and organization in the Smeal College of Business at Pennsylvania State University, said in *The Harvard Business Review*.

"However, it can also result in spiraling coordination costs for managers, untenable amounts of wasted effort, and the inability to respond quickly to client requests."

To reach the right balance, Luciano suggests these strategies:

Smartly manage **when** employees work

Rethink when employees work together.

When people need to collaborate to get a job done, you'll want to examine the workflow.

Chart out project tasks and timeline. Then ask employees to schedule a specific set of days or hours so their work overlaps on

Please see Flexibility ... on Page 2.

Sharpen Your Judgment

Fired for his own good – or ADA violation?

"It seems so sudden," said Manager Renee Carr, tears welling in her eyes as she spoke into the phone. "Just weeks ago, you seemed perfectly fine in the office."

"Just weeks ago I *felt* perfectly fine in the office," said Luis Ramirez. "I went to see my doctor a few days ago, and he agreed something was off."

"And now, here I am, nearly a week later, in the hospital undergoing more tests," Luis continued.

"They really think it's cancer?" Renee said, barely able to believe it either.

"That's the thing," Luis said. "They do, but they won't start treatment right away. So I should go about living – and working – as I always do until they sort out what's next."

"Oh, no, Luis," said Renee. "Is it really prudent to come right back to work? Shouldn't you focus on your health for now?"

"I can do both," Luis said.

Whose best interest?

But Renee didn't give him the chance. She terminated his employment, noting he needed to "focus on his health."

Luis didn't see it that way. He figured he was fired for possibly having cancer, which violates the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) agreed, and filed a suit on his behalf. The company fought it. 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.

Flexibility ...

(continued from Page 1)

pivotal phases – such as the kickoff, brainstorming sessions and approval.

Of course, not every project goes as expected, and some become unexpectedly urgent. So you might get employees to schedule aligning “work bursts.” For instance, employees are expected to work from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. the first week of the month. They can choose their 40 hours per week for the remainder of the month.

Look at team dynamics

Rethink *who* works together – and more specifically, *how many* work together.

When you have fewer physical or time overlaps, you might want to reorganize larger teams into smaller, empowered, closely connected groups.

Smaller groups are more flexible, agile and adaptable.

Let’s say you break a group of nine into a three groups of three.

The manager still has oversight on how projects get done. But the small group can make quicker decisions, coordinate their work and adjust for each other when necessary.

It saves time and money on

coordination, and may help everything move forward more quickly.

Share information differently

Make information-sharing a job criteria and make more information available.

When people aren’t co-located, they can’t “pop their heads in” each others’ workspaces to give or get updates. And getting everyone on the same page at the same time isn’t as easy.

With a dispersed workforce, you want to avoid waits on updates and answers. To keep information up to date (by the minute, hour or day), require employees use and update your tools for project management, communication and workflow.

Luciano even suggests “dusting off” old-school tools like the RACI matrix: Note who is Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed for each task.

Make connections

Regularly map out employees’ tasks. Help employees see how each is connected to the next. The regular analysis and transparency can help employees set priorities based on what everyone does and needs.

That “will help ensure that your employees’ time and efforts are well spent, no matter when or where they’re working,” says Luciano.

Source: tinyurl.com/flexibility520

TECH CORNER

FBI’s best tips on how to avoid ransomware attacks

If you could get help on how to avoid ransomware attacks, wouldn’t you want tips from the FBI?

You’re in luck. We have five tips from the bureau’s Denver office.

Solid, expert advice

To avoid the malicious software that blocks access to your computer and files until you pay a ransom:

- **Have a plan.** Make sure everyone knows what to do the moment they *suspect* an attack – and make contacting the FBI part of it.

- **Spread the word on phishing lures** – bad files or links sent in email that look genuine but are malware that will lock up the computer system. Note: They can even come through known, but hacked, email accounts. So check before you open.
- **Back up data** often and keep the backup segregated and offline from normal operations.
- **Regularly check on all network devices** to be sure they run the most current versions of operating systems and apps.
- **Make sure all anti-malware software** is up to date.

Source: tinyurl.com/attack520

COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

■ 3 ways to rebuild trust with anxious employees

Employees are worried. And they don’t trust their employers as much as they used to, Harvard researchers say.

Part of the problem: Leaders had to make difficult decisions in the past two years that employees didn’t like.

Now’s the time to rebuild trust. Here are three steps:

- **Take responsibility.** Acknowledge any negative impact leaders’ decisions have had on employees. Let them know you recognize the tough emotions they’ve experienced.
- **Explain why decisions that affected employees were made** and what was weighed in the process. Transparency builds trust.
- **Offer to fix problems.** You might not be able to reverse what’s been done, but you might find a fix that suits employees and rebuilds trust.

Source: Harvard Business Review, tinyurl.com/trust519

■ Reimagine your workplace culture

Leaders who care about culture can create one where employees are engaged and loyal.

Here are four tips to improve, reimagine or rebuild your culture:

- **Amp up professional development.** Training, mentoring and coaching improve everything. Ask employees what they want to learn and make it happen
- **Communicate differently.** Connect frequently, informally and transparently – unlike corporate communication that’s often rare, formal and carefully guarded
- **Keep out poison.** Hire carefully. One bad hire can spoil an entire team. Choose patience over haste, especially when you feel rushed to fill a vacancy, and
- **Work with other leaders.** Culture is contagious. If it’s bad in one area, yours will be, too. But your good culture can make a positive impact.

Source: tinyurl.com/culture520

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 Shift in rewards, recognition proves successful

Before the pandemic, we celebrated employee contributions with lots of recognition and rewards on-site.

And fortunately, employees responded well to it. The real-time, public recognition and rewards compelled them to work toward goals.

But the pandemic changed everything – rewards and recognition included.

Quality of life outside work counts

So when people started working differently, we figured we had to reward and recognize them differently.

With the work/life balance off,

we recognized that people started to care even more about their quality of life outside the office. We switched to more individualized rewards and lots of direct, peer-to-peer and boss-to-employee recognition. We used an app to manage it all.

Now Dave in Finance can get tickets to the zoo. Or Mary in Sales cashes in on a couples massage. And Nate in Maintenance signs up for guitar lessons. Rewards that improve their quality of life have improved their work experience, too.

(Taylor Smith, CEO and Co-founder, Blueboard, San Francisco)

2 We help staff handle mental well-being

Employee mental well-being has been the focus of many conversations and movements in the past two years. There's a reason for that: Employees are stressed and stretched more than ever (see *Page 4* for more details).

We wanted to help our employees get the exact mental health support they needed when they needed it.

That led us to take a tiered approach to self-management.

Use what you need

Tier 1 was a communication plan to get the word out about the resources that were available and to make ours a safe workplace to talk about mental health struggles.

Tier 2 help was expert information and talks on important subjects such as managing depression and isolation available to access at any time on a portal.

Tier 3 included virtual access to Online Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (OCBT). Now employees can get exactly what they need.

(Anna Mittag, SVP of Products and Services, LifeSpeak, Toronto)

3 Build 'Next Big Idea Time' into meetups

Like most managers, I set aside time to check in with my direct reports. It's important to talk at least weekly about work, life and progress.

But as time went on, I noticed our meetings turned out to be status updates and small talk. While that was important, we weren't solving problems or creating solutions.

That prompted me to carve out time in one-on-one meetings to get creative.

Remove obstacles, kick off projects

We'd set aside some time to dream up or talk through new ideas. It gave employees opportunities to further explore things that may have hit a back burner to all their daily tasks.

We've discussed non-urgent issues that ended up helping us solve other problems, remove obstacles or even kick off new projects.

Just setting aside time to think and speak outside the box has improved our operations and relationships.

(Jeannie Chun, People Business Partner, Sift, San Francisco, shared this success in First Round Review)



YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ Can we ask for a 'doctor's note'?

Question: An employee takes off a lot of time for doctor's appointments. I don't want to ask personal questions, but is there a point where I can ask for a doctor's note to explain the absences?

Answer: Yes, assuming your attendance policy calls for it, and the note will cover any requirements to account for the absences, says employment law attorney Rob Thomas of the firm Holland & Hart LLP.

Caution under FMLA, ADA

But if the employee uses Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) leave, you'll need to be cautious asking for a note.

Keep in mind, you can ask for the doctor's note to approve the missed time under the FMLA or ADA. But you can't ask for anything along the lines of health conditions, diagnostic specifics or when the employee will be cleared to come to work, Thomas says.

Source: tinyurl.com/doctornote520

LIGHTER SIDE

■ Good work turns into good deed and long day

Most people don't mind helping out at work. But Louis Angelino took it to new heights.

The professional cleaner arrived early to a new address and grabbed the key from under the mat. He got straight to work, cleaning the condo that was in the middle of a small rehab.

After three hours of mopping, scrubbing, dusting and giving a little love to the client's two cats, he got a text: "When are you going to clean my place?" the client asked.

Louis replied, "I'm in your living room playing with your cats."

"I don't have cats," the client replied.

Louis cleaned the wrong place!

Source: tinyurl.com/cleaningfairy520

COMMUNICATION NEWS

Why we're overwhelmed with meetings

Meeting hatred may be more of a meeting addiction, say Harvard Business School researchers.

They recently uncovered the psychology behind meeting overload. It includes:

- **FOMO.** Some people have the fear of missing out on something that's probably not important, or being judged for skipping, if they don't accept every invitation.
- **Commitment Devices.** In some cases, organizers and attendees think meetings are the only way to make sure people follow through on commitments.
- **Mere Urgency Effect,** which is doing

something seemingly urgent, but not important, to relieve some stress.

- **Meeting Amnesia.** We go to set meetings because we don't remember what happened last time (which probably wasn't much).
- **Pluralistic Ignorance.** You think the three hour meeting is useless, but don't speak up because no one else does. Meanwhile, they think the same, so it just goes on.
- **Selfish Urgency.** Leaders call meetings for their purpose and don't think how it will affect overall productivity and morale.

For solutions to these problems, check out the study at tinyurl.com/meetings520

New struggle hurts performance: How to help employees

What your employees do – or fail to do – at night impacts their work in the day.

So it might behoove you to help them sleep better. Requests for help with sleep issues skyrocketed after the pandemic started, according to research from LifeSpeak.

“There was a little uptick in well-being assistance with anxiety, depression, relationships and resilience,” says Anna Mittag, Researcher and SVP of Products and Services at LifeSpeak. “But requests along the lines of sleep hygiene skyrocketed.”

Employees often struggle to sleep well because they're stressed over work/life balance and feel like they must be “always on” in hybrid or remote work situations.

2 tactics to help

To help, you might:

- **Designate no-work hours.** Employees need to know when they *shouldn't* work as much as they need to know when they should.
- **Direct them to your mental well-being resources** to tap into sleep hygiene help.

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

No. The company settled. It will pay the employee \$150,000 and hire a consultant to work on changes to policies and training practices.

The employee's attorney claimed the company violated the ADA when it fired him because the manager feared his medical condition. The cancer and its treatment is considered a disability. Furthermore, the company couldn't even point to poor performance for the firing. The manager specifically said it was about his “health.”

The company's attorney argued the manager was trying to help – not hinder or violate the ADA – when the manager let the employee go. The manager was concerned about the employee's well-being and gave him the space and time to heal.

Eventually the company agreed to the settlement in favor of the employee.

Make no assumptions

Managers never want to make assumptions about employees, their medical status and ability or desire to do their jobs.

Instead, you might consider the best practices the company in this case will now take up: Train managers, hire an ADA consultant and require second reviews on leave-based terminations.

(Based on *EEOC v. Victory Automotive Group Inc. and Cappo Management XXIX Inc.* Dramatized for effect.)

Quotes

They say that the world belongs to those who get up early. That's not true. The world belongs to those who are happy to get up.

– Monica Vitti

Each person must live their life as a model for others.

– Rosa Parks

The best preparation for good work tomorrow is to do good work today.

– Elbert Hubbard

EDITOR
MICHELE MCGOVERN
mmcgovern@pbp.com

MANAGING EDITOR:
RENEE COCCHI
rcocchi@pbp.com

PRODUCTION EDITOR:
P.J. FRONZEO

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR:
CURT BROWN

Subscriptions: 800-220-5000

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Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors (ISSN 1523-4290), issue date March 14, 2022, Vol. 24 No. 520, is published semi-monthly, (24 times a year) by Progressive Business Publications, 384 Technology Drive, Malvern, PA 19355; PHONE: 800-220-5000. FAX: 610-647-8089. Periodicals Postage Paid at West Chester, PA 19380. Postmaster: Send address changes to Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors, 384 Technology Drive, Malvern, PA 19355.