

Achieving Effective Employee Relations: The public relations perspective

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Abstract

Organisations depend mainly on the mutual understanding and goodwill of the employees to achieve their objectives. This paper takes a look at public relations role in employee relations, the two-way communication, and the tools used for employee communications, the objectives, the benefits, and the guidelines for effective employee communications. A conclusion is drawn from the discussion.

Introduction

Public relations influence the attitudes and actions of the management that employs it. It can help management express opinions and articulate views; it can secure public attention through competence in communications. It can counter arguments of those with opposing views by furnishing information and view points. Public relations can encourage an uncommitted segment of the public to take a favourable position on specific issues. According to Keghku (2003:2),

The cardinal principles of publications is that the general good must be served, and this can best be done by making available to the public at the appropriate time the fact and interpretations of events behind the scenes in the languages they can understand.

Public relations according to the Mexican statement (1976) is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing a planned programmes of action, which will serve both the organization and public interest.

Public relations aim at satisfying the interest of its public. The number one public of an organization is the employees. Employees are the lifeblood of an organization. These are all those who work for such an organization. This ranges from Junior to Senior Staff. Public relations activities are designed to achieve effective employee relations. This is necessary because it is the workers that implement all organization policies, and are the catalyst for the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. It is therefore necessary to have a deliberate plan of activities that will make them understand, accept, appreciate and participate fully in organizational programmes. Good public relations begins at home with company newsletters, social events and internal and external recognition of superior performance. To achieve a successful free enterprise sector, top management must implement a policy of good human relations with all employees. Those who trade in high streets cannot be isolated from the social distress of the high streets. Full, frank, two-way communication, open management and above all respect for the contribution people can make, given encouragement are foundations of effective policy of good human relations which cost time, effort and money (Haywood 1984).

A sure way of achieving organizational goals and objectives is to have a good communication flow within the organization. With this the organization will have stable staff, ready acceptance to change, high productivity and good profit.

The hallmark of good organizational employee relations is primarily rooted in efficient management principles and practices, which help an organization to conduct its businesses most profitably and thereafter commit the organization to provide the requisite enabling environment good working conditions; recognition and respect for human dignity, personal values, right and privileges; free and

equal opportunities for advancement and growth, recognition and reward for excellence (accomplishments); adequate latitude for self discovery (potentials) and expression towards a mere progressive and enlightened leadership; responsibility backed with the concomitant authority; proper supervisions without being unnecessarily high handed; payment of wages and benefits that are not only commensurate with productivity, but also in line with prevailing practice in other similar establishments.

An organization that disregards the welfare of employees and goes ahead to treat them as mere tools or means to an end, erodes itself of the desired goodwill, support and understanding of its workforce and also works its untimely perdition. Employee relations determine internal morale. According to Ajala (2001),

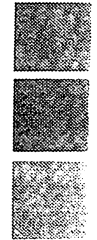
Morale is reflected in the attitudes, which employees bring to bear on their work performance and personal relationship. Organizational climate dictates the true feelings of members towards their employers. Organizational climate must evolve a spirit of cooperation; the climate must be conducive to motivate employees to work willingly and effectively. In our organization the climate must be healthy in order to get the best of our management staff as well. In search of excellence therefore our communications must establish the right climate for our ambassadors. (Ajala 2001, p.200)

Employees relations can be achieved through what we call employee communication, which aims at creating understanding and winning support among employees to enable the company to operate more efficiently. According to Haywood (1984 p75), today's employees expect "communications". But, even in most sophisticated companies in the most advanced countries, most employees are communicated "at" rather than "with". Often little more than lip (or open) service is paid to the concept of two-way communications.

The employees of an organization have an information right, need and desire and these are not the same. Information rights are laid down by law. The public relations adviser will need to have a clear view and understanding of the information that has to be provided by statutory right, union negotiation or trade precedents, which should be provided in the interest of good understanding and which is confidential and does not have to be freely available until a time the company decides that it is appropriate. Employee communications ensure that the work force is informed, involved and is sharing in the success of the company. A sense of belonging to the organization and a sense of excitement in the job bring about committed work force. Employee communications cannot be left to informal networks. It is a primary, planned and sustained part of management responsibility to employees from their recruitment through termination. According to Belch and Belch (2001:582)

Maintaining morale and show casing the results of employee efforts are often prime objectives of the public relations programme. Organization news letter, notices on bulletin boards, paycheck envelop stuffers, direct mail and annual reports are some of the methods used to communicate with these groups, personal methods of communicating may be as formal as an established grievance committee or as informal as an office Christmas party. Other social events, such as corporate bowling teams or picnics, are also used to create goodwill.

The communication programmes as a consequences should be such that it is able to provide the employees with enough information about their organizational issues and events in which they have a stake, such as employment job security, in service and after-service fringe benefits, nice working conditions, promotions, discipline, wage/salary and method of payment, facilities for improvement



and self expression, new product, sales and marketing arrangements, fund generation (sources) and many other matters affecting their general welfare. Well informed employees and this positive disposition predictably lead to greater productivity, improved accomplishment of organizational goals and enhance public relations status and credibility. This is based on the belief that well-informed employees usually interact with the publics (external) and can impact significant positive effects on the existing community, customers, investors and the general public, thereby translating into favourable organizational climate, increased productivity and better rewards.

Sound and effective communication, based on two way flow of information, therefore is a crucial factor in organizational success, for it creates conducive fora for employees to express to management their opinions about their working conditions and other issues regarding their general welfare and also provides them with additional opportunity to ask questions about their organization's philosophies policies and actions. It equally enhances better understanding, trust and harmony. According to Baskin and Aronoff (1988)

Ideal organizational climate are characterized by feelings of trust, confidence, openness, candor, supportiveness security, satisfaction, involvement, pride in the organization and high expectations to a large extent, successful employee relations in general and effective employee communication in particular depends on positive organizational climate. (Baskin and Aronoff, (1988, p. 145).

Since employee communication is the key to employee relations let us briefly consider the tools for public relations approach to employee communications. Ajala (2001:201) spelt out the tools as follows:

- (i) Employee indoctrination video (on production)
- (ii) Employee Newspaper to recognize outstanding performances.
- (iii) Bulletin board.
- (iv) Payroll stuff and (Gift vouchers)
- (v) Employee handbook to contain grievance procedure.
- (vi) Staying tuned in to the grapevine in order to release full facts when harmful rumors spread.
- (vii) Management/supervisors/employees meeting.

Haywood (1984:83) listed the following tools for employee relations.

Company newspapers or magazines, regular news sheets, notice board bulletins, telephone information service, news video or films, CCTV discussion, tape/slide presentations, company radio stations, information seminars local or trade press relations, local radio and TV news, new corporate identify, poster or wall charts, information folders, induction programmes, regional and national conferences, policy leaflets, direct-mail to home, annual reports, company history, community sponsorship, open days and facility visits.

Public relations strive to identify the communication needs of employees of an organization, assesses the communication problems and establishes the solution. These actions bring about the achievement of employee relations which in turn create conducive atmosphere for the achievement of the organizations goals. The company or organization has the following to benefit from employee communication (1) low level of absenteeism (2) high productivity (3) low labour turnover (4) low industria conflict (5) profitability and growth.

Now that the benefit of employee relations and what it entails is fully discussed, it is necessary to think of a way forward, a direction or a guide for the achievement of employee relations, below is a guideline for effective employee communication.

- (i) Establishment of a goal oriented communication policy that helps employees to fully know and understand the details of the terms and conditions of service - facilities and benefits that exist in their organization once the primary needs of employees are taken care of they predictably become most receptive to information.
- (ii) Adequate knowledge of their organizations background polices, programmes, activities, procedures, structures, accomplishment and problems and other relevant information that can meaningful assist them in understanding better the organization for, which they form part.
- (iii) Establishment of a labour management team with sound work relations, with a view of building progressive and enlightened leadership through regular consultations on pertinent staff matters that give the workers a voice of decision. Without this feeling of sense of belonging, employees are bound to distance themselves from such an organization and its management.
- (iv) Establishment, planning and execution of an employee communication or information programme that will take care of the communication needs of the labour force.
- (v) The willingness on the part of the management to develop an open mind and share vital information with the employees, bearing in mind that an informed employee is ultimately a happy and proud employee, always willing to represent and defend the organization.
- (vi) Information dissemination must be based on the principle of completeness, timeliness, accuracy and need and must be factual to avoid misconception, misunderstanding and suspicion. Communication should also be dishd out in small does and repeated often for clearer and better understanding. Management must therefore be sincerely willing to share relevant information with employees, and further ensure that information (messages) dissemination flows through clearly defined structures - vertical, horizontal, upward at downward etc.
- (vii) There should be appropriate functional media for specific and general communication goals of the organization. The media should be available and accessible to the employees, and the existing communication policy should encourage workers to use such media as and when necessary.
- (viii) Written communications (message) are most desirable and advisable in official relationship in order to avoid ambiguity, distortions and controversy after associated with oral communications.
- (ix) Messages must be well prepared by experienced communicators. This suggests that the communication of important formal information should not be entrusted with persons of limited communication experience. The public relations executive and his staff should oversee this serious assignment message content must also accommodate both the organizational need and human interest stories revolving around employee job security and other welfare programmes in the organization.
- (x) Method of presentation should involve more persuasive appeals, rather than coercion or pernicious propaganda inputs. It instead should be a two-way information flow between management and employees.

Conclusion

Since employees are organization's ambassadors to the general public, and on whose truck/van an organization's gospel is preached to the outside world, there is a need to provide them with timely and accurate information which is the basis for good community and general public relations practice.

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