Make communication toolkits part of a broader approach to supporting and educating managers

MAKING MANAGER TOOLKITS WORK

A recent discussion on the Communicators' Network reveals a growing interest in the use of toolkits to help managers communicate. In a new guide to *Developing a communication toolkit for managers*, author Andy Szpekman examines the rising popularity of toolkits.

The idea for Melcrum's guide to *Developing a communication toolkit for managers*[1] was prompted by a discussion on the Communicators' Network. This question was posted: "We're looking at designing a communications toolkit, which managers can use on a regular basis. Has anybody produced anything similar?"

The slew of e-mails that followed attest to wide interest in this topic. It seems a number of organizations have already created a manager communication toolkit or are planning to do so.

This pattern is consistent with a larger trend toward pushing communication responsibility to managers. In a recent Melcrum survey[2], for example, 44 percent of the internal communicators said they plan to spend more or much more on manager communication.

Solid research

The importance of manager communication is backed up by other solid research. Consider this:

- In his report *Communicating Big Change*, consultant TJ Larkin suggests employees are nine times more likely to support a change if they hear it from their manager compared to reading it in the company newsletter.
- According to consultant Angela Sinickas, writing in the April/May 2005 issue of *SCM*:

"Many companies conducting regression analysis to find the drivers of desired behavioral outcomes – like retention and productivity – have found that the single largest driver is the strength of the communication link between employees and supervisors."

The punch line: If you want to reach and engage employees – and enjoy the associated benefits – you need to get managers on board.

So, given the recognized importance of manager communication, why does it seem so many managers struggle with it? Assuming managers have the motivation to communicate – which is influenced by rewards and measurements – I would argue the problem stems largely from confusion about what to communicate and a lack of basic communication skills.

Building competencies

Toolkits can address both these issues by helping managers build four core competencies necessary for effective communication:

- **Insight** is needed for planning performance goals and linking them to company priorities.
- **Feedback and coaching** are needed to pinpoint improvement opportunities and to help employees prepare for future assignments.
- **Listening skills** are necessary to draw information out of people and to probe the root causes of problems.
- **Communicating** – both orally and in writing – is key to shaping employee beliefs and attitudes.

Applying toolkits

Our research suggests that organizations take varying approaches to the use and content of toolkits and similar resources. So before developing your own toolkit, it's important to consider the challenges your managers face and how a toolkit can be a useful day-to-day resource.

The idea is to guide managers through actions such as planning to communicate, leading communication events and engaging staff to deliver their best work.

Whatever the approach taken, five "rules" emerge when it comes to applying toolkits. These can be summarized as:

1) Incorporate toolkits into a broader set of communication guidelines, training and resources.
2) Make toolkits available online.
3) Use briefing packs (or tailored toolkits) to prepare managers to convey important information.
4) Get managers on board by making communication a priority (e.g., by linking it to their pay and by reminding them of their responsibilities).
5) Test your toolkit on managers during the development phase.

Our conversations with practitioners tell us that toolkits alone won't turn managers into great communicators. But as part of a broader approach, they can play a valuable role in supporting and educating managers. scm

[1] For more information on this guide go to: www.melcrum.com

[2] From *The Pulse: Essential data on internal communication budgets, salaries and trends*. Go to: www.melcrum.com

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