

Organizational Communication Techniques for Managers

Local government employees want to know more about their organizations, but sometimes they must rely on the local newspaper and the rumor mill as their two primary sources of information. Unless employees are kept informed of a local government's activities, they seek out information elsewhere. The effort to improve communications can result in both improved employee relations and enhanced community relations.

Public administrators can build a healthier organization through open communication by encouraging employee participation and feedback on working conditions, employee benefits, personnel policies, and council policies. I have found that some simple techniques can be used to advise employees about policies affecting their organization and their community.

Staff meetings. Meetings of staff with department heads should occur on the morning after the meeting of the council or governing body. Key issues and official actions of the council should be presented in a written summary. Department heads should post the meeting summary on all employee bulletin boards on the same day, to ensure that employees have quick access to the information.

Employee bulletin boards. Each department should maintain a bulletin board in an area where employees take breaks or have time to read official memorandums. Employees want to know about council meetings, changes in personnel policies and benefits, grievance systems concerning discrimination, safety policies, and council activities. If informed of local affairs, they will be more agreeable to accepting responsibility while they are accomplishing organizational objectives and supporting unpopular council decisions.

Updated personnel policies. Personnel policies should be updated annually to reflect changes in employment law and organizational and employee needs. All departments should be encouraged to review and suggest changes in personnel policies. Employees are aware of problems in the day-to-day administration of these policies and will have excellent ideas for improvement. Employee participation leads to greater employee acceptance and ease in implementing policies. Grievance procedures should be designed to resolve concerns quickly and fairly.

Safety practices. Employees want to know that the manager cares about their safety. They can play down the need for bulletproof police vests, flame-resistant firefighter turnout gear, safety harnesses, or back braces. Most employees and their family members, however, will respect officials for their sensitivity to safety issues. Many local governments have implemented random drug testing, which is supported by most employees even when employee unions have resisted drug testing.

To maintain an employee safety committee focus, appoint an employee to do one safety inspection per month. The safety committee should review the inspection report and make a recommendation to the department head, with copies submitted to the manager.

Job and safety training. Employees want to do their jobs better, but they need on- and off-site training to support skill development. State municipal leagues or national public interest groups often offer training programs in a variety of areas, including law enforcement, fire safety, wastewater collection and treatment, water treatment and distribution, street maintenance, and parks and grounds maintenance.

Environmental concerns and safety factors in local services pose liability issues for employees and citizens that were unknown or misunderstood 10 years ago. A locality's training record may be its best defense in fighting unwanted litigation. With proper training, employees will become manager's partners in promoting safety for the public and for their colleagues.

Checklist

- Leadership and communications training.** Local government department heads and supervisors can be recruited from within the organization for their proven expertise and job performance. Local governments have the responsibility to provide these proven performers with training in supervision, employee communication, employee motivation, performance appraisal, team building, and employment law.

Employees of the 1990s are better educated and diverse in their ethnicity and personal lifestyles. Their concerns for equity and consistency require a constant effort to build employee relations and commitment to the organization. Interpersonal communications and maintenance of relationships with others are the foremost skills that a department head or supervisor needs to lead successfully.

- Employee assistance programs.** Research has shown that the work environment affords little sympathy for employee personal issues. Increasingly, however, organization leaders are recognizing that job performance and personal issues are inseparable. When job or family stresses exist, employees can carry these burdens into the other side of their lives. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) can be set up to provide easy, confidential access for employees or family members seeking intervention, counseling, or related assistance and services. Employees' or family members' personal problems with alcoholism, financial affairs, marital tensions, and similar pressures can face each employee during his or her working life.

Police officers, firefighters, and paramedics are particularly exposed to traumatic situations, including loss of life. Employees responding to these emergencies should be directed to confidential counseling within 24 hours of an incident. When loss of life, serious injury to a child, or other disasters have occurred, employees may feel internal guilt or a sense of helplessness. An EAP gives a clear message that the local government manager recognizes and respects the unique hazards of public service and cares enough to assist employees when assistance is desirable.

- Local government officials' contact with employees.** When the city or county manager's contact with employees is limited, employees may mistakenly perceive the manager as not caring about them or their performance. Research has shown that public sector supervisors have a much higher need for recognition in their workplace than do private sector supervisors. The manager who stops by the fire station or water plant for a casual visit, for example, will be respected for doing so.

- Employee benefits and health fair.** Invite representatives from the locality's health or life insurance company, deferred compensation plan, or retirement plan to visit for a day. The local public health office might be willing to do basic checks of blood pressure or other health checks at little or no charge. Employees can have questions that the personnel staff cannot answer. Direct contact with company representatives improves understanding and appreciation for these programs.

- Attitude surveys and input.** Employees are the organization's best source for identifying ways to improve services to citizens. Ask workers to participate in an anonymous survey on organizational needs. Because employees in some departments may feel intimidated and reluctant to ask questions or voice an opinion, a survey can help obtain their opinions and protect them from fear of retaliation.

Employees usually take pride in the organization and its services. The jobs of meter readers, building inspectors, water meter service technicians, and others require employees to travel virtually every street in a community regularly. A manager would be smart to find ways to tap this unlimited source of information and insight on the community.

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