

Internal Strategies to Restore Employee Trust

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In the wake of sexual harassment scandals and the subsequent #MeToo campaign, increased concerns regarding data privacy arising from the Facebook/Cambridge Analytics debacle and trust in government and corporate institutions at an [all-time low](#), perhaps it's not surprising that employees are increasingly wary of the organizations they work for.

That problem is further compounded by the fact that human resources departments, which hold responsibility for ensuring a positive and safe corporate culture — including resolving employer-employee conflicts such as investigating and addressing sexual harassment and gender and racial discrimination claims — are now the [least trusted of all corporate functions](#). Companies that opt to place the internal communications function under HR rather than with PR do a disservice both to its employees and HR itself, given that most HR professionals lack the appropriate experience in strategic communications planning, messaging development and the most effective ways to disseminate those messages.

Building trust is everyone's job

Regardless of where internal communications sits, however, the responsibility for building trust by effectively and regularly communicating with employees begins with the C-suite and goes all the way down to anyone who supervises one or more workers. [A workplace engagement study](#) of employees at companies with one thousand or more workers revealed that 94 percent of employees want to hear more about what's going on from leadership; 86 percent would feel more engaged if they were more informed about company news and information; and 68 percent of executives believe they do a "good" job of communicating, though only 21 percent of employees agree.

To help executives improve how they communicate and keep employees more engaged, below are seven internal communications tips to keep in mind.

Vary how you share information. Baby Boomers are more likely to open an email than read something posted to the firm's Intranet, while Millennials will favor a text message over email, so develop different ways to deliver information to employees. If the news will significantly impact how the organization functions, what it does or marks a key milestone, consider having the CEO leave a voicemail message on everyone's business phone or creating a brief video message that pops up when people turn their computers on in the morning. Bonuses or raises, like performance reviews, are best delivered individually by a worker's supervisor.

Be inclusive. One law firm I worked at developed an internal newsletter to keep its partners and associates abreast of cases won or deals signed, press coverage, awards and rankings earned and new client updates. Just one huge drawback: the newsletter wasn't shared with support staff, which were kept in the dark regarding the firm's achievements and how their individual tasks and responsibilities helped contribute to the bottom line. Restricting general information to certain people also creates a two-tiered system that fosters resentment and mistrust.

Give employees a safe way to report harassment, fraud or other bad behaviors. A key reason employees opt not to report bad behavior of colleagues or supervisors is fear they'll be viewed as disloyal or that HR will automatically side with the more senior person, resulting in further harassment or termination. One solution may be contracting with a qualified independent third party to serve as an ombudsperson. Another would be the creation of a report abuse tip line, where employees can report information anonymously. Both options work well, but only if leadership commits to follow up on complaints and investigates them thoroughly.

Let staff know when the company faces a challenge or crisis. This may seem counterintuitive, particularly for private companies which lack a mandate to publicly disclose if they have failed to meet forecasts or are under investigation by a regulatory agency. Yet employees sense when supervisors or leadership seem tense or take note when senior leadership suddenly seems to constantly be behind closed doors. If your company has encountered a setback, convey it openly to staff, as it will reduce dangerous speculation and uncertainty which could result in your best workers jumping ship or a leak to the press. Moreover, when workers know a problem exists and why, they may be able to help identify a viable solution.

Give staff skin in the game. Granting employees a say in how the company operates boosts productivity and morale because they feel vested in the company's performance. While most companies can't offer staff stock options or other monetary perks, they can still give staff some ownership. For example, instead of leadership determining which charities or causes the company supports, let employees decide by setting aside a set amount of dollars,

developing a pre-vetted list of trusted philanthropic organizations and asking employees to vote for which organization(s) should receive the money and in what percentages.

Announce all new hires, not just senior executives. Not every hire warrants a press release or even a mention on the firm's website. The new employee's supervisor, however, should introduce the person via email or post an announcement on the company's Intranet, internal blog or social media site(s). Not only will it make the new staffer feel welcome, but it demonstrates the areas in which the company is growing or strategically maintaining or increasing support, which helps all employees better understand the company's larger goals.

Host in-person or virtual town halls. These forums allow employees to freely ask questions of the CEO or other designated senior leader. For larger organizations, perhaps town halls should be hosted by department or office so people don't feel intimidated asking a question before a large crowd. Some companies have better success with such town halls if people send in questions ahead of time and anonymously. This gives the CEO more time to prepare her answers, but also generally results in staffers asking tougher or more critical questions about the company's direction. That may put a bit more pressure on the C-suite, but it also lets them know what's on employees' minds and shows that personnel care about the company's long-term success.

Nature abhors a vacuum, so when companies fail to communicate with their workers regularly, employees will fill in the missing information with rumor and gossip. A culture of transparency and openness generally reduce the risk of disgruntled workers taking their unhappiness to the media or expressing it online. Employees will also be more willing to stick with leadership during bad times if they have regularly been communicated with and recognized during good ones. Moreover, when employees themselves feel trusted by their employer, they're far more likely to trust the company in return.

The current situation offers PR executives working in-house as well as external agencies new opportunities to reach out to senior leadership about developing an effective internal communications program that can help build or restore employee trust. To do so, however, make sure you do a little trust building of your own by establishing good rapport with your or your client's HR department.

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