

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR LISTENING STRATEGY.

WHY LISTEN?

Recent years have seen well-regarded institutions slip from grace with a resulting impact on trust. This has prompted many of us to not only examine what really drives trust, but to think about what can be done practically to keep - or help regain - the confidence of our employees.

Top Banana's recent Leadership, Trust & Communication report (<http://goo.gl/hzW08q>), prepared with the University of Westminster and the Institute of Internal Communication, provides useful insights into the importance of trust within an organisation.

It underlines what many understand intuitively, that four key themes - ability, benevolence, integrity and predictability - need to be present within an organisation in order to create the conditions for trust.

This Spotlight document focuses on effective listening as the first step in helping to create trusting organisations.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR TRUST?

It could be said that trust is the responsibility of every employee. However, if you're someone who is examining trust in your business, this document will help you to look at how listening works in your organisation today and how to develop listening further to support you in this area.

It won't give you all the answers, but it will help you to ask some of the right questions.

“Effective listening shows that the leader is benevolent and has their employees’ interests at heart.”

Leadership, Trust & Communication report (2015)

SO WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT REALITY?

You may have a formal programme of listening in place as part of an engagement strategy ... or it could be that pockets of listening take place driven by individual leaders.

What are you seeing in your organisation?

What to ask

What's already in place?

Who owns this?

- The senior leadership team.
- A single sponsor.
- The communication team.

How are the insights shared and used?

How do people perceive listening?

- Tick the box or a genuine chance to give feedback?

Is it actively helping us to build trust?

What's great about the listening that's happening?

What could be better?

While not scientific, it's a good starting point for exploratory conversations with others.

WHAT SHOULD SUCCESSFUL LISTENING LOOK LIKE?

Having decided to do something about listening, creating a shared view of what success will look like is a good place to start.

Choose who you want to involve in this thinking (eg a line manager, colleagues, senior leadership team). People who may have a vested interest or who could help drive action in the future can be particularly useful and involving them early is helpful.

Senior Vice President of Pfizer, Jonathan Emms, believes organisations should:

“promote and support feedback, straight talk and straight listening - with senior leaders leading by example.”

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Call Huw Wigley on 0203 463 6033 or 07703 685926. Alternatively call Nick Terry on 01562 700 404.

TEN INITIATIVES TO BUILD TRUST.

Building Trust - published by Top Banana in September 2015 - identifies ten initiatives to build and maintain leadership Trust in organisations.

Taking a look at these will help you to see if your listening approach is likely to support you in building trust.

1. Build the right team
2. Benchmark trust and measure progress
3. Be consistent
4. Encourage feedback – and listen to it
5. Keep colleagues informed
6. Provide purpose
7. Communicate face to face
8. Dare to be different
9. Apply context
10. Be committed

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

Use the following questions to identify where you are now and where you want to get to. Remember to sense check responses against the Ten Steps to see whether your approach is likely to help you build trust in your organization.

How do we want to use the insights?

- Eg help drive business strategy.
- Shape future vision.
- Measure employee engagement - such as levels of commitment to change or a willingness to give discretionary effort.
- Drive changes to your people, communication or engagement strategies.

What do we want to ask?

- This is likely to be driven by the first point.

What will we commit to do with the results?

- How do you plan to act on feedback eg use it to inform business planning or make improvements in a certain area.
- Think about the promise you're prepared to make on this to colleagues and on which you can be held to account.

If we get this work right, what is the difference we'll see in our business in six months' time/ this time next year?

- You could show this by creating futuristic quotes showing what you'd ideally want people to be saying about this work and how they'd be actively using the information to make changes.

Who's going to own listening to make sure it gets the right time and support?

- Perhaps agree an Executive sponsor who will put their weight behind this work.

Who's going to do the listening?

- And what help might they need to do this well?
- With live listening events, some leaders find it helpful to have feedback on their own style and to be coached on listening techniques or how to handle tricky questions.

What's the right amount of listening and how will we measure this?

- Consider what else is going on in the business. It may seem obvious but avoid times when the business is going to be consumed by the 'day job'.
- Think about the target number of participants you'll need to make sure the feedback is really representative of views and choose a listening frequency that's not onerous but useful.

What are the right tactics?

- Use a mix to help engage different employee audiences – see 'The action you can take' for more ideas.

How will we share what's been done as a result of the feedback?

- Will you use your existing channels or is there an opportunity to do something different?
- Make it clear when the feedback is going to be available and do your best to keep to this timing.

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THE ACTION YOU CAN TAKE.

The range of listening channels and tactics is endless; from annual engagement surveys to online discussion forums to question sessions with leaders.

However as the Leadership, Trust and Communication report states, “trust is best built up by frequent face to face interactions”.

People want to create relationships with their leaders and, in a busy workplace, listening opportunities can provide the chance to do this. An idea of some of the tactics you might consider is shown here.

Examples of face to face listening opportunities...

Informal

- Coffee sessions between senior leaders and employees. Ask employees to put their tough questions on Post-its while leaders get their coffee. This encourages questions on real issues with the comfort – if needed – of anonymity
- Live listening opportunities – ask senior leaders travelling to different sites to always schedule 30 minutes for time with the local team to take feedback
- ‘Feedback Fridays’ – encourage people into the habit of regularly asking questions and giving feedback by setting days when people can do this with their colleagues and line/ department managers

Formal

- Panel discussions with senior leaders at events where employees pre-submit questions. Have an employee act as MC and pose questions
- Live feedback opportunities at Town Halls. People can text in questions to be asked there and then. Comfortable for big groups and leader’s responses can be authentic and in the moment
- Employee/leadership forums – regular sessions where nominated employee representatives can feed back on key plans and issues, building an on-going rapport and helping to shape the future

THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR.

Whichever tactics you choose, remember some ‘watch outs’:

Be authentic – tactics need to feel comfortable for employees and leaders.

Is there any previous listening ‘baggage’ that might trip you up?

- Eg is there a history of a listening not being acted upon so it no longer has credibility.
- What can you do that’s different to help overcome this?

Will the way you listen fit with your culture or feel odd?

It’s helpful to think about other, broader measurement activities you have in place, for example for internal communications or employee engagement, and how you’ll make sure your listening tactics are defined and integrate with these.

HELPFUL TOOLS.

There are useful frameworks and tools available to help with different aspects of this, such as the CIPR’s Inside Communication Measurement Matrix.

If the first attempts don’t get the results you want, then acknowledge this, move on and try something different. Invent something new and keep listening.

WHAT NEXT?

We hope this brief look at listening has helped prompt some ‘aha’ moments about your business, and that we’ve got you mulling over ‘what next?’

If your organisation is great at listening and you’d be willing to share what you do ... get in touch.

Other interesting reads can be found on our website...

www.top-b.com/trustinleadership

- [Leadership, Trust & Communication report](#)
- [Building Trust – ten initiatives from senior leaders](#)
- [Spotlight on Line Managers and Trust](#)

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