



SANDOR FIZLI

Getting management and employees to speak the same language

In 1992, the Hostess Frito-Lay plant in New Minas, Nova Scotia had the dubious distinction of being the worst of their four Canadian plants. Profits were down—way down—as was employee morale.

"There was little to no front-line responsibility," says Karen Cummings, human relations coordinator. Management had an almost "secretive" attitude and revealed corporate information on a "need-to-know" basis. People on the floor were expected to just put in their eight hours and leave decisions to management while supervisors were spending all their time "putting out fires." This left workers resentful and at odds with each other.

Cummings and a team of concerned managers sought the advice of Chris Marshall, owner of Redesigned Systems Inc., a management consultancy based in Waterloo, Ontario. With Marshall's help, the plant's 150 employees worked together to identify problem areas, set production targets, and find ways to cut costs. Their goals ranged from lowering absenteeism to enhancing workplace safety, from turning off lights to saving paper. Supervisors' roles changed "from 'cop' to 'coach,'" says Cummings. "We redesigned the way we conducted our business." Employees were privy to formerly secret corporate information.

Talking down barriers

BY TRUDY FONG

"For the first time, we shared the books with the employees," says Cummings. "Everyone needed to understand the finances and how each of us impacted the bottom line."

Employees worked as teams,

keeping track of their improvements on a giant "score-card." Within the first year, the plant's employees had achieved about 85% of their goals and team projects could be credited for approximately \$900,000 in savings.

"As the employees saw that we really were trying to change, our critical mass began to build. People got off the fence and into the program," says Cummings.

The results have placed the plant at

The flexitime solution

At Maritime Life in Halifax, four out of five employees live in dual-income households, and 80% acknowledge tension trying to meet the demands of career and family. Last year, the company, in co-operation with the Halifax YWCA and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, put the juggling act of work and home under the microscope to see if their "flexitime" program really did help employees handle stress.

Judy Kaiser, human resources manager, says 98% of their

employees use flexitime regularly. "It's up to you to decide when your job needs the extra time," says Kaiser. "People who use flexitime feel trusted to get the job done, whether at home or in the office."

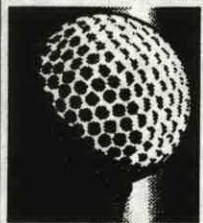
The study found that even though women still retain the primary responsibility for household work, "managers, male or female, and male staff had the most difficulty in balancing work and home life."—T.F.

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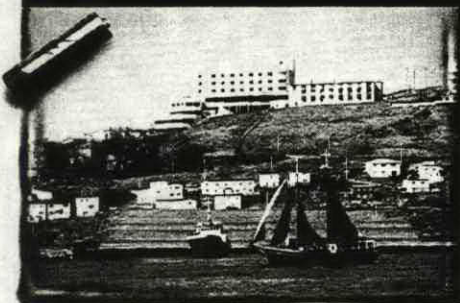
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the top much more often. "Our new challenge is to achieve that same success now that we are being ranked within all of North America—about 27 plants in all." But Cummings insists that job satisfaction was a bigger priority than the actual dollars. "We have seen a dramatic change in our employees. Some people who four years ago would be intimidated to speak out at a meeting are now preparing and presenting business plans to vice-presidents."

The New Minas plant is proof that good communications within a company boost not only morale but also the bottom line. The results would not surprise communications consultant Paul Harrietha of Buck Consultants in Toronto, who has made a career out of helping managers talk to their employees—and really listen to what they say.

"Guys in hard hats can cut right to the chase," he says. "They hate having tough decisions dressed up in jargon. When they've been sacked, for example, they know it. They don't want to be told that it's 'management-initiated attrition,' or that they have been 'right-sized,' when they know they've been fired."

Good communication has to help employees understand what is expected of them and why. And that message has to motivate them to perform.

Harrietha's team uses focus groups to find out what employees are thinking, measuring communications like any other corporate initiative. "When we do the reality check with employees, often what employees want has nothing to do with what management thinks they want," says Harrietha.

Understanding the differences between the perceptions of management and employees is the first crucial step to better communication, which, in turn, will help companies through difficult periods—for example, mergers, cutbacks, or lay-offs.

Canadian workers are, indeed, very anxious about big events like these, according to a joint survey by the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Canadian Psychiatric Association. The survey found that 50% of us feel "really stressed" from a few times a week to all the time—the strain of juggling the conflicting demands of

work and home while also trying to decipher the mysteries of corporate decision-making proves too much for many Canadians. It's no wonder we're stressed—the same survey found that two-career couples in Canada average 12 minutes a day in private conversation with one another, and three-and-a-half minutes in activities with their kids.

Companies are starting to recognize that what happens to employees at home has as much effect on productivity as what happens inside the office. Corporate Health Canada Atlantic vice-president Jim Burchell helps workers deal not only with work-related matters, but also with family, legal, financial, and health issues.

"Companies have now placed a value on the human resource," says Burchell. Instead of focusing on salary perks as a route to better performance, companies are increasingly trying to provide a better working environment through their employee assistance programs (EAPs), which are growing at phenomenal rates.

Psychologists and social workers

with CHC, a private firm, deliver counselling services to 46 corporations in Atlantic Canada. Three-quarters of major corporations in Canada now provide counselling services, but small businesses still lag far behind, even though they employ 85% of Canadians.

"There has never been a concerted effort to deliver EAPs to small business," says Burchell. "What we try to do is have a consortium approach." CHC organizes groups of small businesses so that the sum of them add up to a large group policy.

The biggest headaches that EAPs handle are family issues, such as divorce. The second biggest problem is anxiety and insecurity. "There is no such thing as security anymore but people don't realize that. When people haven't accepted that, they become anxious and start to break down."

About 6% of employees usually need EAP support each year, says Burchell. An organization of 2,000 will have at least 120 employees who will seek counselling annually. Likewise, a company of 20 will have at least one employee in need. FINS

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