Tips for communicating better with your employees

By Tom Fox August 8

Are you satisfied with the level of communication from your agency leaders?

My organization, the Partnership for Public Service, and Deloitte, recently analyzed the government-wide responses to three employee survey questions to see how federal leaders were doing regarding their communication with workers. The results were not very encouraging.

Overall, the analysis found that only about half of federal workers government-wide are satisfied with the level of communication they receive from senior leaders, and the percentage of positive responses has been declining since 2009.

Only 45 percent of federal employees, for example, responded positively when asked in a 2013 survey question whether they are satisfied with the information they receive form management regarding what is going on in the organization. In addition, just 48 percent of federal employees reported being satisfied with the extent to which managers promote communication among work units. Managers were more successful when it came to communicating the goals and priorities of the organization, with 58 percent registering a positive view.

The bottom line is that federal leaders can and should do better, and in the process they’ll help improve employee satisfaction with their jobs and workplaces. To create a more engaged and motivated workforce, agency leaders need to establish an effective communications strategy that includes keeping employees apprised of important developments, providing clarity on goals and priorities, and establishing a means to receive and respond to feedback.

As a general rule, the Partnership’s analysis found that agencies receiving high marks from employees on leadership communication tend to be proactive, making a concerted effort to keep workers informed.

Here are some approaches that could help federal leaders communicate better with employees:

**Make communication a consistent priority.** Establishing effective leadership communication requires a long-term focus, not just short-lived initiatives. There are multiple venues where employees can receive information from senior leaders, ranging from quarterly call-ins to in-person and virtual town hall meetings. NASA, for example, hosts a virtual executive summit that allows Administrator Charlie Bolden to connect with employees in diverse geographic locations using online tools. NASA’s managers also actively seek employee feedback through focus groups and surveys, customizing questions based on their immediate relevance to the agency.
Communicate through multiple platforms. In order to effectively communicate with all staff, agency leaders should use multiple platforms. From more conventional means of leadership communication, such as one-on-one discussions and emails, to more innovative communication methods, such as video conferencing and social media, leaders should leverage a range of platforms to communicate with employees.

Maintain open lines between leaders and employees. Effective communication is only possible when those in top positions maintain open, direct lines with employees. Agencies can foster such communication by hosting office hours where employees meet directly with leaders, and by organizing webinars that allow leaders to overcome geographical hurdles and engage employees located outside agency headquarters.

Implement employee suggestions. Soliciting employees’ opinions is an initial step toward improving agency communication. Simply collecting these ideas, though, does little to improve satisfaction if employees believe agency leadership does not use their feedback. When leaders implement ideas generated by agency staff, employees receive a clear message that their voice is both heard and valued. The Department of Transportation (DOT) launched an online community, IdeaHub, where agency employees can submit and collaborate on ideas to drive innovation and change. Once these ideas are refined, they are communicated online to everyone at the agency and to the individual who originally submitted the idea. By doing so, DOT’s leadership demonstrates that communication with employees is taken seriously.