

Sharing Information With Employees

Facilitating the free flow of information to help employees meet their goals is crucial, but knowing when to open or close the pipeline is also important.

Knowing when to open or close the pipeline is essential.

By Matthew T. Patton

Page 1

Let's say you've been handed a piece of oh -so-juicy news about someone in your facility. It swirls in your head, popping like a toddler's mouth full of Pop Rocks. You're itching to tell everyone, but you can't. The information is a secret—something you've been entrusted with keeping to you and only you.

This scenario is not unheard of. In fact, it's quite common. But when is sharing information with employees a good idea? Experts say that the free flow of information is essential when it helps employees push the workplace in the right direction, aligning with the company's mission and strategies. Other times, when addressing health or other private matters, it's better kept to yourself.

Facilitating the free flow of information to help employees see those goals is crucial, said Michael Fritsch, COO of Confoe Inc., San Jose, CA, a recognized workplace, HR and operations expert with more than 25 years of experience in workplace issues, management and leadership. One of the specialties of his company, Fritsch said, is enabling the free flow of information in the workplace to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

"The free flow of information in the workplace is essential to an organization's effectiveness today. This especially is true with knowledge-based workers and technology driven companies where employees must make decisions consistent with the organization's mission and strategic direction," Fritsch told *ADVANCE*. "These employees often are working in dynamic environments where their decisions have a real impact on business results."

What Should Stay a Secret?

Be forewarned, however, that despite the advantages of free flow of information in the workplace, some information must remain a secret.

"There are legal requirements to keep confidential such things as medical records, credit reports, background checks and social security numbers—you need to guard and keep secret such things," Fritsch advised.

To avoid organizational issues, he noted that certain pieces of private information also should be kept secret, such as employee compensation, performance reviews and disciplinary actions. "Finally, there are some intellectual property areas such as trade secrets that need to be more closely guarded."

What Info Should Flow Freely?

In general, Fritsch said the more information shared in the workplace, the better. "You want to give employees a good understanding of the company's mission, strategic direction and current priorities. You want them to understand the company's current performance, your market and your customers. Most importantly, let them see how their performance and actions impact the performance of the company as a whole."

Fritsch maintained that the free flow of information framed within this strategic alignment generally results in employees that are both happier and more productive.

Continued on page 2 ...

Page 2

Sharing is Empowering

Wally Adamchik, president of FireStarter Speaking and Consulting, Raleigh, NC, and author of *NO YELLING: How Marines Really Lead and You Can Too*, opined that there are few good reasons not to share.

"Certainly proprietary issues are in the mix here, but the reality that unless we are talking about research, there is little that is *that* secret," he said.

He added that the most prevalent reason that information goes unshared is because of the insecurity of some bosses. "They view having superior knowledge as giving them power. It doesn't. Power comes from the ability to get things done, and an informed workforce will make the boss look good."

Adamchik also explained that the reasons for sharing information are many. "When a leader chooses to share information, regardless of whether it is significant, the employee gets a powerful message from the boss, 'I care enough about you to tell you what is going on.'" He says this makes the employee feel valued, often leading to higher productivity.

Another reason to share information is that most employees are smart and they have great ideas. "If they are kept in the dark, they cannot develop ideas that will help the organization nor can they make decisions that support where the boss wants to go—mainly because they don't know where the boss wants to go," Adamchik said. "Finally, this gets to a succession issue. If we don't share information with employees when they are junior, they will not know how to handle it when they advance in the ranks. So, sharing information is developmental, too."

Situational Analysis

Remember, however, that some matters simply must remain confidential, said Phillip Maltin of The Davis-Maltin Law Firm, Santa Monica, CA. "For instance, a business loses the right to claim trade secret protection of certain types of information if the business doesn't aggressively protect the information and keep it private."

Maltin cited Coca-Cola as an example. Imagine, he said, the difficulty the company would have protecting its formula if it had not strictly limited who got to know the recipe. "Additionally, some information, such as allegations of sexual harassment, could lead to lawsuits for defamation if not kept confidential."

He concluded that sharing information with employees "probably takes the form of a bell-shaped curve." Some things must be disclosed and some things must not be disclosed. The majority of situations require individual analysis of what to do with the information.

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