

Two Unique Organizational Communication Systems

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines two unique communication systems designed to facilitate effective organizational functioning and continuous organizational improvement. The outcomes for both systems are examined and analyzed. Recommendations for implementing such systems are provided.

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To genuinely pursue organizational excellence, consistent and accurate feedback is essential (Drath, 2008). According to Deming (1993), feedback should include employees (internal customers) as well as customers (external customers). Two novel communication approaches designed to clarify policies, procedures and processes as well as solicit suggestions, ideas, complaints and solutions are the “Who has the Dean’s Ear?” suggestion box and “Express to the Top” employee feedback program.

Who has the Dean’s Ear?

As part of its study of the various aspects of continuous improvement, a School of Education at a southern, flagship university developed and implemented a suggestion box that, over a four year period, received an average of 60 entries per month. Most suggestion box techniques have a short life span and after the first month or two fail to

generate useful data. The “Who has the Dean’s Ear?” suggestion box was designed to encourage university students to continuously make suggestions concerning both short and long term functioning of the School of Education. The first two months generated 218 suggestions, each month (after the initial two months) the number of suggestions averaged about 60 over the next four years. Vacation months produced less volume; however, in the initial year the average number of entries per month was 61.0 based on ten months (the first two months generating 218 were not included). The following academic year produced 63.7 entries; the next received 58.2 entries and recently the suggestion box earned 61.5 entries per month.

An 8” x 10” photo of the dean’s ear is mounted to a 25” x 32” dark blue poster board. It read:

WHO HAS THE DEAN’S EAR?
YOU DO
PROBLEM? IDEA?
COMPLAINT? COMPLIMENT?
FILL OUT A CARD TODAY!!!!

The poster board rested on a small table 29” tall. On the table is an 8 ½” x 8 ½” transparent plexi-glass box situated next to an ample supply of suggestion forms.

The dean read the suggestions each Friday and wrote a personal note, in long hand, to the students that supplied their name and address. The response was mailed to the student in a university envelope accompanied by a bumper sticker that read, “I gave the dean an earful.” An interesting side note was that the students did not put the stickers on the bumpers of their cars but instead, they display them on their notebooks, dorm doors, dorm windows and bulletin boards. It is conceivable that the suggestion box continues to generate activity over an extended period of time due to the fact that the students received a personal reply, they enjoyed the bumper sticker, and could see many of the ideas and suggestions they provided implemented. Also, the demographics of the School of Education changed as a new group of students enter the university each year. Many of the incoming, new students may have seen the suggestion box as a novel, and unique way to express their concerns.

Changes directly resulting from the suggestion box technique ranged from trash receptacles placed next to the auditorium, to developing a plan to recycle paper and cans, to erecting lights in the parking lot, to putting up a stoplight at the crosswalk in front of the school building, to suggestions for course and instructional improvement. Over the four year period the percent of outright complaints dropped from 14% to less than 2% and the percent of compliments moved from 3% to 21%.

Express to the Top

A local business, that was an external stakeholder in the efforts of the School of Education, also focused its attention toward continuous improvement. After fine tuning

various organizational systems, an employee feedback system was developed and implemented. This company-wide feedback process was designed to engage and empower the employees of the business. The overall goal was to improve communication so each employee and self-directed team could perform their various tasks more efficiently and effectively. The program was designed to:

- Offer a system that provided consistent and reliable responses to questions and concerns.
- Create an organization climate that would encourage the expression of ideas without fear of reprisal.
- Support, encourage, and recognize the value of employee feedback and contributions.

Often, because of communication deficiencies, most companies, unlike people, die before they reach the age of 40 (Peters, 1994). The communication system was seen as a medication that could offer a cure for a lack of communication and prevent its recurrence in the future. The business was focused on becoming a learning organization, and in order to accomplish this, all organizational members had to put themselves in a continual learning mode (Liker, 2004).

A task force was established by the business to develop, field test and subsequently implement a program that would encourage and support the “voice” of all organizational members. A Technical Training Manager was promoted to a newly formed position of Organizational Communication Coach and Chief Learning Officer. A logo was developed which illustrated an old elevator dial with the words printed in a semicircle above the dial “Express to the Top.” The logo was attached to stationery, suggestion forms, and a 6’ x 10’ logo was proudly displayed outside the President’s office. Footprints were placed on the floors in the halls all over the building leading to the President’s office. Footprints are even placed in elevators leading to the floor of the President’s office.

The program generated enthusiasm throughout the company resulting in an abundance of requests for information and many suggestions for improvement. Requests ranged from asking what direction the company was taking during these times of change and uncertainty, to clarification of specific policies and company documents. Suggestions for improvement included, utilization of space, placement of equipment, alternate ideas on paper flow, allocation of duties and ideas for marketing.

Similarities of the Two Programs

Although the organizations had different functions (university vs. business) and their specific feedback programs target different constituencies (internal vs. external customers) there are some similarities that are worth highlighting: a) both feedback systems were designed for easy and fast communication to a top official, b) both provided quick turn around time, c) a personal response was received by those who

include their name, d) both systems were conceptually simple to understand and implement, and e) both programs were presented in a novel way that caught the attention of organizational members and encouraged their participation.

The lifeline of continuous improvement is communication and feedback. No organization whether business, government, or educational can survive and successfully function in today's competitive environments without totally embracing the culture of continuous improvement (Deming, 1993). The systems outlined in this article are prototypes of future, more effective, and "user-friendly" organizational communication systems. Further study of these and other successful organizational communication systems and their redesign and replication will invariably lead to better organizational communication, more successful team functioning, and enhanced service delivery to stakeholders.

References

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