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Respectful communication in the workplace

Ineffective communication in the workplace can have a disastrous effect on your bottom line. On the other hand, when communication between employees, and between employees and customers is effective, you may see sales soar and employee job satisfaction reach an all-time high. For this reason, creating activities to improve effective communication skills not only benefits your business, it's critical to your business success. If you believe your employees could benefit from activities that improve their communication and listening skills, consider the wide range of communication-focused activities that will improve the way employees talk, listen, write and interact with their peers, supervisors and customers. Mentoring, workshops, experiential learning, and communication skills exercises are a few ways to improve communication in the workplace. Though mentoring often is viewed as a one-directional path for professional development, both the mentor and mentee can potentially benefit from the pairing. For example, say you have a mentor whose area of expertise is instructional systems design (ISD) who has been with the company for many years. During that time, she has excelled in her interaction with direct reports as well as clients but isn't as skilled in the latest technology for delivering classroom training. In this case, the mentee can learn from the mentor — usually through observation and coaching — how individual job performance can improve through one-on-one communication skills. Likewise, if the mentee is relatively new to the company but skilled in using technology, the mentor may also learn how to use the latest web-based tools for instructional design to communicate with classroom learners. There are several workshops and seminars that teach participants effective communication skills. Developing a workshop that specifically addresses communication within your company can be especially helpful to employees. This kind of workshop might work on communication challenges between employees or between employees and customers. For example, creating a training course for newly hired sales representatives on how to understand customer requirements not only teaches basic listening skills but gives them tips on how to deal with existing customers and how to cultivate relationships with prospective customers. These kinds of communication-focused activities for adults are a form of experiential learning — interactive and hands-on. Pre-employment testing and employee refresher courses may be useful in assessing the communication skills for prospective and current employees. As part of the selection process, your company might decide to use pre-employment testing to determine which applicants are best suited for certain jobs. For example, you could request a writing sample from applicants who apply for jobs that require extensive written communication either for internal or external purposes. For current employees, including communication skills as a performance standard enables you to formally review employee performance in this area. It's also an opportunity to provide coaching to improve verbal or written communication skills that will serve to enhance the employee's job performance. Effective communication in the workplace can reduce disputes between employees and management. When dealing with other businesses, a business owner can use effective communication to increase sales by conveying a professional image and reducing misunderstandings between a business and its clients. Employers should incorporate into their business model techniques and strategies to improve workplace communication and implement these policies with the aid of management. Business owners should keep employees informed about the general operations of the business and company goals. They can encourage communication between employees and management by having an open-door policy that allows employees to resolve their issues by speaking directly with higher-ups. Transparency builds employee loyalty, which increases retention rates. The workforce of U.S. businesses increasingly contains employees of different cultural backgrounds, gender and ethnicity. Sensitivity training workshops use role-playing activities to teach workers better ways to communicate with each other. Business owners can require sensitivity training for employees and management during initial orientation and on a regular basis to teach workers how to deal with differing viewpoints and mannerisms of their co-workers. Employers can improve workplace communication by screening job candidates for communication skills during an interview. Businesses can require that existing employees with substandard writing or computer skills take classes. A few employees who spread gossip, criticize customers or co-workers or have consistently negative attitudes can hinder communication between management and co-workers, so business owners can resolve issues with these employees through training, discipline or termination. Employees communicate more when they have a bond of trust with their employers. Employers should talk to their employees to determine their hobbies and interests. They can host company recreational events, such as barbeques and theme-park days to give employees a sense of community and let employees know that they appreciate their efforts. Employees who feel appreciated will communicate more with owners and management and work harder for their employers. No matter what industry you are in, communication is key in the workplace. Without proper communication, your company is not going to achieve its objectives. Within a standard company, communication can take the form of internal, external, formal and informal, upward and downward, lateral and diagonal, small group and nonverbal. All these types of communication come into play in order for the company to convey all necessary information. Internal communication is any communication that occurs inside of the workplace. This type of communication is achieved through any medium (for example, email, phone, fax or face to face). External communication is any communication between a member of your company and someone outside of your company. When you talk to a customer, send an email to a potential client or call a supplier about an order, you are doing external communication. Types of communication in the workplace include formal or informal communication. Formal communication is any communication that promotes the workplace objective. Informal communication involves discussing topics that do not pertain to work. Informal communication is harmless if it is appropriate and you only talk about non-work topics on your lunch break. Informal communication can cause serious problems if it is inappropriate (for example, rumors, gossip or crude jokes). Upward communication is the questions, inquiries and even complaints that employees direct toward their superiors. Downward communication is the guidance and leadership management gives to employees. If a manager explains an assignment to a subordinate, that is downward communication. If an employee asks her boss questions pertaining to that assignment, that is upward communication, according to Communication Skills for Professionals. Lateral (or horizontal) communication is the messages exchanged between employees on the same hierarchical level. When two board members hold a discussion or when two secretaries hold a discussion, this is lateral communication. Diagonal (or cross-wise) communication occurs when messages are exchanged between employees of various different hierarchical levels. If a vice president holds a discussion with a human resources manager, this is diagonal communication. Small group communication occurs when a meeting is held. This can be a staff meeting, a board meeting, a sales meeting or any other type of meeting where a group of employees meets and exchanges messages. Usually, one or two individuals lead the meeting and initiate the topics for discussion. Eye contact, facial expression and other forms nonverbal communication are signs that your boss or another employee is pleased (or displeased) with your work. If your co-worker rolls her eyes at you, you are probably going to feel like she is unhappy with you. On the other hand, if your boss smiles at you after your presentation, you'll feel secure that you did a good job. Sometimes, a smile is worth a thousand words, according to Workplace Communication. Communication at all levels is critical to an organization's success. Whether you're talking to a teammate or you're crafting a marketing message, not only do you have to clearly get your message across, but the content of what you say matters, too. Whether executives should get a some leeway when it comes to communication ethics is debatable, but generally, honesty is the best policy, both for a clean conscience and good business. Some would argue that "spin" - the shaping of a phrase or event to meet your needs - is a necessity in the world of PR, especially if your company's a bit confused about a problem. As Steve Tobak says in an article on BNET, saying you're not sure of something can cause a full-blown brand management crisis in some cases. In his article, Tobak describes one scenario where he denied that his company's microprocessors had overheating issues, although testers at his organization couldn't confirm those statements with certainty. Tobak argues that his statements upheld share prices and maintained customer confidence during a time of crisis for the company. While the strategy worked for Tobak, because he turned out to be right, it's worth considering what could have happened if he had been wrong. Customers frown upon companies that lie and make promises that they can't keep. Making strong, yet dubious statements in the age of social media is even more risky. Fail or come across as untruthful, and everyone in the connected world knows about it instantly. It's better to be honest about who you are and what you can do now than risk brand damage later. According to BNET writer Geoffrey James, being more ethical makes for better advertising results. Today's consumers are savvy and can often tell when marketers exaggerate the truth. For copy that resonates with customers on your website and in your product brochures, replace opinions with facts. You say your software improves productivity, but do you know that for a fact? If you can cite a study showing that your software makes users 25 percent more productive, then you're getting somewhere. While being honest with people outside the company is important, being honest with coworkers is also crucial for fostering team spirit and a sense of trust. Before the start of a project, team members should gather to discuss goals and get to know each other. Teammates should also decide on a communication plan together and stick with it. While these steps are important for any team, BNET writer Wayne Turnel says they're particularly important in remote teams. Lack of planning can leave some team members feeling resentful when communication breaks down and encourage the perception that some people aren't pulling their weight, whether or not that's true. To promote positivity, meet frequently and encourage everyone to contribute. The Northern Virginia Ethical Society suggests additional tenants to make sure people communicate ethically. Try to understand others, speak from your own experience, let others speak their piece without interruption and don't assume that you understand someone without taking the time to listen first.

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