advice chief

Listen to the people who actually do the work

By Jeff "Chief" Urbaniak
COLUMNIST (www.AdviceChief.com)

If you're a manager or leader in your organization or company, one of the biggest mistakes you can make is to have no process for collecting workers' input for operational or strategic planning. Whether that input is a complaint, suggestion, concern, or just simply a comment, it's vital for you to have a mode to receive it as well as provide feedback to it. Then ultimately, make decisions or conduct operations based on it. If you have no process for this purpose, it's just a matter of time before you and/or your organization becomes mediocre or outright fails.

When I was a superintendent for a large organization, I published a quarterly feedback report that contained three things: 1) someone's question, suggestion, idea, or complaint; 2) the organization's response provided by the manager whose umbrella hovered over the topic related to the comment [the response was also vetted through me and the big boss before being released]; and 3) the office of primary responsibility to monitor the response and all follow-up actions associated with the comments.

I would collect all comments in person, in feedback boxes posted throughout the organization, or by email. Even comments that were hard to comprehend due to sloppy handwriting or unclear meaning, I would still include some excerpt about them in the report in order to solicit a resubmission for clarification.

The quarterly feedback report was emailed to everyone in the organization as well as posted on the organization's website or in the internal Intra-net files. This allowed anyone and everyone to read it and see top management's answers to every comment. Explanations and reasons were provided regardless of the decision outcome. In many cases, we adopted new procedures and polices based on people's suggestions or complaints.

This quarterly feedback report contributed to higher morale and more open lines of communication between employees, managers, and top leaders. Workers were engaged and certainly felt they were being listened to.

This feedback process worked great for me but it is not every leader's cup of tea. If you don't like the idea of having to publish a quarterly report, perhaps you can publish it semiannually, or in the case General Electric (GE), you can listen to your workers in a town hall or work group style session.

When Jack Welch was CEO of GE he put emphasis on "working out the nonsense of GE" and dealing with problems that needed to be "worked out." Hence, he created a program called "Work-Out."

Work-Out began in the fall of 1990 with Welch wanting all GE employees to complete at least one Work-Out session within a year. His initial emphasis was to get employees engaged rather than on developing and refining specific techniques of the session.

Work-Out sessions were conducted far enough from the workplace, often at a hotel, to get people's undivided attention. They lasted 3 days and would have between 20 and 50 participants. Discussions would lead to proposals to the manager and he or she could only respond in one of three possible ways: 1) agree; 2) say no; or 3) seek more information. In the last case, the manager would be required to come up with an answer within a month.

So whether you publish a feedback report or conduct a session like Work-Out, it is important for you to have some communication channel that enables you to listen to employees. After all, they are in more advantageous positions than you are to see, hear, and feel what's going on. Their senses are vital to your business Intel, and the best companies and organizations in the world have great Intel!

~ The End ~