

Article 28 How do you make your staff feel?

“People will forget what you said.
People will forget what you did.
But people will never forget how you made them feel”

Dr Maya Angelou

As much as I agree with the sentiment expressed by Maya Angelou, I have difficulty in accepting the logic of the statement. Given that taste and touch are out of bounds as far as the employer/employee relationship is concerned, it is what the employer writes, what the employer says and what the employer does that results in how the employee feels.

It is no coincidence that “communication” is the only attribute that is measured in each of bpi’s surveys. It is after all the nervous system of any organisation’s ability to function, both internally in relation to its employees and externally with suppliers and customers.

However, in terms of influence on how people feel, there is an indisputable hierarchy.

The least influence comes from what people write, in second place comes what people say and – ahead by the proverbial country mile – is what people do.

The reality is that the talent to influence how people feel through the written word alone is rare and becoming rarer. These days it is pretty much confined to those who write for a living. Yet despite this fact, the use of company newsletters, bulletins, memos and web site articles (well, I had to add the last one) continues to grow. I’m sure they are well meaning and, if used as part of a total communications strategy, they can be moderately influential but all too often, they are used by senior management to salve their consciences. Put it in the newsletter and then it’s not our fault if the staff don’t read it.

The spoken word is possibly a little more influential but unless you have aspirations as an orator, your ability to positively influence how your staff feel will be limited to one-on-one communication. Of all the public speeches ever made and recorded in film and the written word, there are precious few that have made their intended audience feel more determined, more motivated, more uplifted. Churchill, Martin Luther King, JFK and Nelson Mandela are clearly candidates for the “precious few” but, hell, here we are talking about people who changed the world, not you and I seeking to motivate a workforce that might number less than twenty people.

So that leaves “what you do”.

And the nice thing about actions that speak louder than words is that you can be just as effective as Charles Dickens, J K Rowling or Sir Winston Churchill. You don’t need any special talent. You only need to be genuine.

Actions designed to communicate fall into two broad categories – actions that signal change and those that seek to align, motivate and make people feel good about their manager and the organisation for whom they work.

Let’s start with actions that signal change. Here are some anecdotes.

When he re-took control of Channel 9 from Alan Bond, Kerry Packer initiated a cost cutting drive by visiting Channel 9 headquarters and turfing out all the liquor from the

executive fridges. Was this a more effective way of getting the message across than writing a memo or doing a staff video?

In order to dramatise a change from being production to customer oriented, the CEO of a multi-national arranged for one of those mirrors that distort the image to be placed at the entrance to the staff canteen with the words – “have you put yourself out of shape for a customer today”?

To signal a less hierarchical and paternalistic management style, the CEO abolished the directors’ lift that ran express from the basement car park to the executive floor and instructed directors to eat in the canteen with the rest of the company’s staff.

In last month’s article, I related the impact that Lou Gerstner’s move to terminate a senior executive’s overhead presentation had on the rest of IBM.

Each of these actions heralded significant change in company culture or strategy. They were effective beyond the bounds of those directly on the receiving end because they killed sacred cows – the directors’ lift, the well-stocked drinks fridges, the ubiquitous overhead presentation at IBM *and* they involved the most senior members of the company. If you are going to kill a cow, kill one that everyone in the organisation knows about.

It is said that people join companies but leave managers. That maxim has a strong element of truth about it particularly if you also accept that the three key employee motivators are appreciation for good work, feeling “in” on things and being treated with respect.

When seeking to change how people feel by what you do, the key word is “visibility”.

Let me illustrate this with a personal anecdote that occurred over 20 years ago but which I will never forget. Our reforming CEO decided to hold six monthly informal meetings between the Directors and the staff. People were encouraged to ask questions of the Directors and if they did not wish to do this at the meeting itself, questions could be submitted in writing beforehand. I chose the latter option and wrote down six questions on various aspects of the company’s business strategy. Three were answered at the meeting before it concluded but the next day my phone rang and a lady on the other end said to me. “I’m Chris’ secretary and he wants to know if you are in this afternoon so he can come down and respond to the questions that he didn’t have time for yesterday”. At 2.00pm, he duly appeared, found a spare typist’s chair, sat down next to me in the open plan office and proceeded to give me responses to the other three questions.

Now there are lots of things to reflect on about this incident.

I cannot recall either the questions or the answers.

I was one of many hundreds of people that made up middle management.

Chris could have given me the answers over the phone or in writing. Instead he chose to do it face-to-face.

I was not summoned to see Chris; he came to see me.

Not only did the story of his action spread like wildfire throughout our division but he had at least one employee who had his utmost respect and who would champion the cause at every opportunity.

Contrast this with another incident.

The CEO of a company that had initiated a Customer Feedback Survey declined to be present when the findings were presented to his staff. Sure, he had received a briefing on the feedback a few days prior to the staff presentation but what's the message that he is sending to his staff – that he has more important things to do than worry about customer satisfaction levels?

In another case involving the presentation of findings from a feedback survey, the room where the presentation was held was not big enough to accommodate all the staff in one hit. So we had two sessions. The CEO was present at both, congratulating all the staff on the results and holding an impromptu session on the initiatives that should be looked at to further improve performance. No prizes for guessing which of the two companies had the higher staff turnover and the lower customer satisfaction levels.

But effective as “management by wandering around” might be, it has to be complemented by informal conversation and the written word. MBWA that is akin to a review of the guard of honour only serves to lengthen the distance between manager and managed.

The advent of e-mail, when combined with action and conversation, provides a wonderfully convenient tool for influencing how people feel. The recipient can be a single person, a specific group or anyone with a PC. But consider this. One of your staff has responded well to a customer complaint. You want to acknowledge this. Do you send her an e-mail? Do you telephone her - or do you walk down to customer service and thank her in person. It's not a difficult decision, is it?

So if you want your staff to feel good about the organisation they work for, set the example. Nothing is as effective as what you do but complement that by what you say and what you write. Above all be visible and impress upon your managers to be likewise.

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