

Aiming for Continuous Communications Improvement

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No one is a perfect communicator, and no co-op experiences completely effective communication at all times. While some co-ops may do better than others—at least as reported in more than 200 staff surveys conducted by CDS Consulting Co-op—communication issues are nearly always on the list of things that staff want to see improved.

While communication issues can be as varied as the people within your co-op, chances are you will recognize some of the common communication challenges from co-op surveys across the country, followed by suggestions to prevent or address them.



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Staff are out of the loop

The first communication challenge can include staff feeling blindsided by a recent change that has been implemented, being in the dark about what management is up to and why, not knowing how to answer customer questions, or learning about a new promotion from customers. Co-ops can struggle with how to keep a sometimes-revolving staff informed about even the co-op's most basic activities.

Some co-ops struggle with wondering how much information is too much, while others wonder what is to be done if they have made information available but staff don't avail themselves of it. The bottom line is, for businesses predicated on excellent customer service, it is everyone's job to make sure that staff get the information they need to adequately inform customers and answer their questions. How to achieve this?

Transparency: Managers generally feel well-informed about the operations of the co-op as a whole, not just their department. The downside to this is they have to spend precious time learning about things that may not seem directly relevant to them, typically in multiple meetings. As a result, some department managers and general managers feel that they are protecting their staff from too much unnecessary information by not relaying bigger picture information. However, having this information helps staff know when to speak up about a good idea or an important caution and makes the decisions that are made seem less surprising.

Oryana Co-op (Traverse City, Michigan) addresses this by using a "Just So You Know" document posted by the time clock as a frequent, brief, one-way communication about anything that might be important to the staff's daily interactions with the customers—from fresh lines being painted in the parking lot to a tidbit about the new competitor coming in down the road.

The good, bad, and ugly: There is very little about business operations that needs to remain truly confidential from staff. However, managers sometimes feel they should save staff from the stress of knowing what challenges the co-op is facing. The problem with that is, in the absence of information people will try to fill in the blanks themselves—and, unfortunately, it is easy for people to assume the worst. While you may feel you are saving staff from the analysis that a new competitor means a 20 percent projected reduction in sales, staff may assume that the competition means the co-op will be put out of business or that there will automatically be layoffs. Instead, managers can be honest, while anticipating and responding realistically to staff reactions.

Formal communication channels: While the trickle-down theory of communication can supplement formal channels, co-ops who rely mainly on informal methods of verbal communication tend to have the worst outcomes, with the breakdowns typically happening between

department managers and staff. Every co-op should have some methods of formal communication that staff can rely on for direct, accurate information. Different methods work well for different co-ops. Some options include an intranet, co-op email, staff newsletter, logbooks, or the Heads Up document created through the Power of Participation program at Weavers Street Market—a document used specifically by marketing departments to inform all of the stakeholders about a new campaign and what their role is in supporting it).

Staff ideas not being used effectively

Are staff members being heard? Communication is a two-way street, and this theme centers on communication coming from the staff and how to manage it. Problems can range from staff not getting feedback on whether or not their idea was implemented, to employees being asked for their

opinion when in reality a decision has already been made, to staff not being solicited at all for how a change will impact their work.

To obtain staff input and use it effectively, consider the following four points:

Understand why you want staff input: Staff have a perspective that a manager can't have—mainly, what it's like to do the tasks in their role on a continuous basis and to have the daily interactions with customers they encounter. It's extremely difficult for managers to really understand the ramifications of a decision on all levels and all positions in the co-op. Asking staff how a decision would impact them has headed off some costly mistakes, both in dollars and staff morale. Additionally, staff have experiences and perspectives from outside of their work life that they can bring to bear on challenges the co-op faces. Engaging a broader group as partners in problem solving is likely to generate more ideas or spark a more comprehensive and effective solution than what you might have initially considered.

Timing: The time to ask for staff input on a decision is well before the decision is made, preferably before the manager is 90 percent certain of what decision will be made. Let staff know the problem with the status quo that you are trying to solve, and even some of the ideas you are considering; then ask for other ideas or problems they see with the ideas under consideration. Staff members in co-ops have told us time and again in surveys how easily they see through a campaign “disguised” as a listening session, where managers aren't looking for new ideas or concerns as much as they are trying to ensure everyone is on board with a decision management has already made.

Implement suggestions: To ask for staff opinions and then disregard their input in order to do what you were going to do anyway is a fast way to ensure disaffected staff. Still, some managers really struggle with giving others' ideas a chance. This can be helped by using a trial period or trial version to test an idea. If there's a way to try part of an idea or test a new system, with a plan to check back in a set amount of time, that can be an easier way for managers to let go of some control and give potentially good ideas a chance. For example, at Weaver Street Market, staff are given the opportunity to offer input into the business plan as well as to volunteer to be part of a staff team to figure out how to make the suggestions a reality.

Close the communication loop: Communication isn't over after a manager has asked for, heard, and used staff input. Staff frequently comment on surveys that they feel they are left hanging, wondering what happened to their suggestion. Is it not happening? Is it maybe happening when circumstances are different? Is it a great idea, but the manager just doesn't have time to make it a reality? Both when suggestions are implemented and when they are not, if staff don't get even minimal feedback about the outcome of their suggestions, it quickly erodes their willingness to share

ideas in the future.

Mishandling of difficult communication

Unless your co-op has been extremely lucky, it has had to make hard decisions while attempting to balance the needs of various stakeholders. Any change, even when positive, can be stressful for those impacted. If you are also taking away something from someone, that stress is magnified. While the decision-making may have been sound, co-ops can find themselves in a public relations nightmare of backlash. To prevent this, consider the following points:

Using change management: Successful change management entails some of the communication skills outlined above, such as initiating communication before the specific decision is determined, and soliciting stakeholder feedback. Additionally, it is important to show the need for change.

No one likes a fix to things they perceive as not broken. Those who have to live with the change will need to understand as well as you do the consequences of the status quo. Once you've gathered input, it is important to explain why the specific change you decided on was chosen from all of the options as the best course.

Acknowledge losses: There are always losses with any change—anything from losing a known and easy way of doing things, to a sense of loss of identity, to lost jobs. As with transparency about communicating the good and the bad, it is important to be up front about who stands to lose something with the change, as well as what each stakeholder group can expect to adjust to or gain. Lastly, be prepared with how to help those most affected deal with their losses, both tangibly and emotionally.

Use informal channels: The more people you can engage as change leaders, the more positive reinforcement and support those who are either resistant to

change or struggling with their losses will have. Train not only the management team on change processes and how to help others through change, but also include assistant managers and shift leaders in learning about how change impacts people and how to help them adjust. All these leaders in the co-op have a role to play in understanding how to help the co-op staff process the change and get through to acceptance.

Ensuring communication is actually effective takes conscious, ongoing effort. As many co-ops' experiences have shown, it is not enough to simply state a message to one group, one time, in one format, and then assume you've done your part. Whether or not it feels as though you should have to, you can improve both staff satisfaction and the customer experience by continuing to hone internal communication that is honest, well-timed, inclusive, and responsive. □

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