

PART 2: ARE YOUR EMPLOYEES REALLY IMPORTANT BUSINESS PARTNERS?

Publication
Sep 1, 2010

(Labor Letter, September 2010)

OR ARE YOU JUST KIDDING?

In our last article we took a hard look at the easy-to-say concept that companies “value their employees” or that employees “are our most important asset.” Easy to say, yes. But the reality is a bit more difficult – and time consuming. In Part 2 we’ll look at this idea in more detail.

MANY MESSAGES TO MANAGE

What does it mean to treat employees as valued business partners? To gain insights into this question, think about how you interact with individuals you view as important in your life. Do you treat them with respect or do you order them around? Do you listen to their views on issues that are important to you? Do you share necessary information with them? Do you show them courtesies? Do you tell them you think highly of them? Do you take their insights and observations seriously?

If those are expected behaviors towards important people, and, if you view employees as important people in your company’s business life, it follows that the same kinds of treatment should work in this area as well. And we believe that similar actions by management will work equally well with workforces as they do between individuals away from the business environment.

However, it’s not so easy as all that because there is not just one member of management dealing with employees. A number of different individuals influence

employees' perceptions of the company. The company has many faces and personalities throughout management ranks, all of whom count in varying degrees in employee perception. There are first-line supervisors, HR and safety representatives, administrative staff, mid-level managers, top management, and others who have varying degrees of visibility to employees. All these individuals have varying impacts on the message the company is trying to send and there must be congruence in the messages sent.

For example, a totally committed CEO's efforts to improve employee involvement can be rendered meaningless by a supervisor who considers employees as lower forms of life and treats them that way. Employees do not see the CEO everyday. They may never see or interact with the CEO. They see and deal with the supervisor every day. Whose message do you think will have the greater impact?

So a decision to recognize employees and to find ways to incorporate their input into the business model isn't nearly as easy as just making the decision to do so. There has to be buy-in from many different levels of management and one of the most important levels is the one that is typically ignored when speaking of management initiatives – first line supervision.

If your first line supervisors aren't recognizing employee contributions, if they aren't asking for and listening to employee input, if they don't recognize the importance of employee ideas and insights, a meaningful employee involvement program will not take root and flourish. Perhaps upper management can make it work for a little while just by force of its authority in the organization, but it will never really work or achieve maximum effectiveness without complete involvement and buy-in from those in management who have the greatest impact on employees' work lives.

GETTING SPECIFIC

Let's assume that management has made the decision that greater employee involvement is important and that the organization should begin moving in that direction. Where do you start?

It seems to us that a very good place to start involves learning what your employees think and understand about the business. What do they know about the conditions that drive your business, what do they understand about the company's strategic objectives, and what performance metrics are most significant determinants of the company's success? If you have been playing make-believe up to now about your attention to employees, it is likely that employees will not know the answers to these questions.

Other pieces of knowledge you will want to gather include what employees think about how the business is being run from a departmental to plant to corporate level,

how employees view their supervisors and managers, what they think about their pay and benefits, what aspects of the job they find really irritating or rewarding. An employee attitude survey is one way to begin learning this information, although it is not the only way. Small group meetings with neutral organizations such as HR can also begin to fill in the knowledge gaps in this regard as well.

A word about employee attitude surveys of whatever stripe. We believe that they can be of significant value to help an organization to understand how well it is meeting employee expectations and needs. But an attitude survey is like fire. Used carefully it can contribute to an improved environment. Used poorly, it can do great harm. It can contribute to increased employee alienation and confirm employee suspicions that management really doesn't care.

By using an employee attitude survey poorly we mean that management does not respond to employee concerns brought to light in the survey. That doesn't mean that management must immediately solve each and every problem raised in the survey or even try to do so. That would be impossible. But you must let employees know at least generally the issues addressed and management must demonstrate its willingness to address key issues brought to light by the survey results. Employees in this day and age have pretty much figured out that management does not have any magic wand that allows it to immediately make everything better. Employees do expect that management will take feedback seriously and not ignore it. They don't expect miracles.

There are many more aspects to the caring-about-employees program and we will cover those details in a future commentary. If any reader has any good stories of how improved employee involvement has impacted your business, I would be glad to hear about them and to perhaps share them with readers.