



SURVEY SENSE

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SENDING SMOKE SIGNALS: What are your communication dynamics?

From the day we were born, communication with those around us began in earnest. At first it may have been a simple cry, telling parents that food was required—immediately! Communication gradually increased to where the spoken word was next understood, then to reading and writing and on to communicating over phone lines, using the internet and bouncing signals off of satellites. How different from the grunts and groans of prehistoric man.

Communication has rapidly become one of the cornerstones of our lives today. We use it in so many ways and we use it even when we don't realize we are. For a perspective on communications based on a micro-second of reading body language, read Malcolm Gladwell's new book, Blink. Moreover, he ties communications, how we think, and decision-making into one nice package.

Whether it means talking to your significant other, writing a report for your boss, or sending an email to the team, to communicate effectively means to understand first that relevant information must be conveyed to the intended audience in an effective and timely manner.

Of course, the other half to communicating effectively is listening effectively—making sure that the meaning of the communication is grasped and understood. Without the interlocking nature of communicating and listening, a great deal can and will be misunderstood. Remember, the goal of communication is to get your message across, to effectively influence and persuade others about the subject at hand.

At Ference Leadership and Strategy and The Center for Survey Research, the question of how well communication is carried out makes up one of the major dimensions measured in both employee as well as guest/customer satisfaction surveys. Questions asked in the former surveys delve into the areas of how employees regard their managers as someone with whom they can talk freely and openly. As well, whether the property encourages people to listen to one another is another piece of the survey communication puzzle.

Exemplifying the use of just such a survey is Station Casinos, Inc. Their being named to "The 100 Best Companies to Work For" list in 2005 as compiled by Fortune Magazine underscores the fact that "we are succeeding and our team members appreciate the culture we have created," said Valerie Murzl, Station Casino's vice president of human resources.

In order to accomplish this, they must have a metric to measure and monitor a multitude of building blocks, one of which is effective communication. In fact, as measured in a recent employee satisfaction survey conducted by Ference Leadership and Strategy, all Station properties that participated in the survey averaged a very high mark of 87.1% with regard to employees feeling comfortable in talking with their managers openly and freely.

Then, when surveyed about each property encouraging people to listen to each other, an

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Page 2 of 2

overall score of 80.3% was registered, well above one national norm of 71.8%. It would seem that generally, those properties that feel that verbal communication is high are also successful in having employees listen to each other. This should not be a novel concept in being effective in communicating with each other!

Another extremely important form of communication is in cooperating with others. By definition, cooperation implies that two or more people are working together. Whether they are verbally communicating, emailing each other, writing memos, giving each other hand signals, or using a combination of the above, they are more apt to get the job done.

Cooperation, however, is not something that automatically happens. It may, but chances are it is something that has to be nurtured and cultivated. Here is where upper management can foster this concept and encourage it to grow. When management and staff are able to get to know each other not only as co-workers, but as people on a more social level, cooperation will flourish. Face it—aren't you more willing to help a friend that has a flat tire rather than helping a perfect stranger?

When survey scores rank in the 60 or low 70 percentiles for statements like, "There is a high degree of cooperation among departments within this property," management can begin working towards improving this important aspect of communication.

Employee Satisfaction Surveys should be an extremely useful tool in helping management concentrate on areas where improvement is necessary as well as to know how change and effective communication can lead to positive attitudes and an improved work environment. Moreover, data generated from a well designed employee survey becomes a vital source of insights for building a foundation for strategic planning. After all, doesn't it make sense to understand the current internal strengths and shortcomings of your property, along with your strategic vision for the future?

With a focus on continuous improvement and communication, management must offer employees varied avenues for this purpose. Allowing time for meetings, both within and outside of departmental planning sessions, utilizing computer networks, the internet and email, teleconferencing and even an occasional informal get-together or party will all aid in the communication your property can use to its benefit.

Keep in mind, however, that all personnel in the property might not have access to some of the high tech means of communication that are available to management. Believe it or not, when all else fails, sometimes you might just have to take a walk, find the person you need and talk to them—face to face! When all is said and done, no matter how fast computers or even telephones are, you can usually find out more in person than you can in any other way yet devised by hi-tech mind-power. Simply put, it is part of communicating effectively. Let's make sure our smoke signals communicate the proper messages and are all aligned for our purpose.

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