World Class Communication

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Survival in today's paper industry means a commitment to world class practices. But how do companies in the paper industry judge if they are "world class?" Many use "benchmarking" to make judgments about the quality of their operations. The benchmarking company seeks out companies that are the best at a given practice, studies that practice in detail and determines how their own methods can be improved. Ford Motor Co., for example, used this approach in the early 1980s in its quest to build a better car. It compiled a list of roughly 400 features its customers said were most important, then set about finding the car with the best of each. The hotselling Taurus emerged from this process after Ford tried to match or top their best competitors.

If an organization is truly "world class," these quality attributes would naturally extend to its communication system. It is critical to define the scope of an organization's communication system. This involves a variety of elements, including employee communication skills, communication channels, information management and communication policies and procedures. The critical issue is how these elements are integrated to meet organizational goals.

What would a "world class communication system" look like?

This is precisely the challenge tackled by the Appleton Papers-Locks Mill located in Combined Locks, Wisconsin. Our goal is to develop a "world class communication system" for the mill.

The organization
Appleton Papers Inc. manufactures a variety of papers, but its staple is carbonless paper. The Locks Mill employs about 700 workers, is unionized and operates 24 hours a day with four rotating shifts.

Over the last 10 years, employee surveys revealed that a persistent problem in the mill involved communication. Management and labor formed a committee to investigate the issue. They hired a consulting firm, MetaComm, to assist in developing a plan for creating a "world class communication system" at the mill. The following framework for this process was developed:

Stage 1: Develop benchmarks
Stage 2: Compare benchmarks to mill communication practices
Stage 3: Develop recommendations
Stage 4: Implement the plan
Stage 5: Reassess and improve

Stage 1

The first task was to develop the benchmarks by which to judge the mill's communication system. Based on the concerns of management and communication research, we determined that five basic aspects of the corporate communication system needed to be evaluated: strategic commitment, communication skills, communication channels, communication policies and procedures and information management (see Appendix I).

Stage 2

The primary tool we used to assess the mill was a 60-question survey that provided a comprehensive measure of most of the previously mentioned categories. Even though employee involvement was voluntary, 55 percent of the mill's employees participated.

An attractive feature of the survey is that MetaComm has a data bank of norms for each survey item based on research in more than 25 companies, encompassing 2,000 employees. Because of this, we could measure how our organization as a whole—or specific departments or shifts—compared to the data bank norm for each survey item.

As a follow-up to the surveys, we:
• Interviewed a sample of the employees and management
• Analyzed key communication channels, such as the employee newsletter
• Observed critical managerial meetings.

The work of piecing together the findings is very much like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. After compiling the information, a picture began to emerge about how the plant was doing in relation to the benchmarked areas. To convey this information, we developed a visual "meter" of each of the five areas and rated the plant on a "low" to "high" scale. For example, strategic commitment was rated fairly high. The mill appeared to have a strong strategic commitment to communication excellence. It was clear that there was a desire to continually improve the communication system as well as develop a clearer vision of the system's objectives. Most employees praised the attempts of management to be more open and honest as an improvement over past practices. Top management was more than willing to pursue cost-effective measures to improve communication. This benchmark received a "high" rating, although not the highest because the focus of the mill's communication quest was a bit fuzzy. This communication study, however, was being used to improve the clarity of the vision.

Stage 3

We developed numerous detailed recommendations for the plant that directly addressed employee concerns. Listed below are a few examples.

• Employee concern: "I don't see the 'big picture.'"

We frequently heard comments that employees were pleased with the "openness" of information-sharing by top management. They applauded mill management for freely

providing information about business conditions and the mill's financial status. However, they expressed concerns about information use—"what does all this information mean and how does it affect me?" In other words, many did not understand the "big picture". They did not see the "fit" of their job in relation to the mill as a whole and did not fully understand the "hows" and "whys" of what the mill was striving to achieve.

This type of comment was not surprising to us. The primary channels used by the mill—the employee newsletter and the bulletin boards—are relatively poor at communicating the "big picture." To communicate this information, a more dynamic channel that allows feedback is needed.

One solution was to develop a new channel. It was suggested that top management hold a quarterly "State of the Mill" address with small groups of employees to discuss key industry trends, corporate responses to the trends, new programs and how these "link" to corporate values. Conveying this type of information orally rather than in written form is much richer, plus it provides an opportunity for the mill managers to "tell stories" and link mill goals to new programs, policies and procedures. These meetings have been held for the last two years on a quarterly basis. The meetings have been well received with good dialogue being generated between employees and mill management.

- Employee concern: "I rely on the bulletin boards around the plant for information. I'm concerned about the timeliness of the postings, the clutter of the announcements, having too many personal items posted and not having enough time to read all the information."

In addressing these concerns, we realized that the bulleting board should serve two primary functions: 1) provide timely information of general interest about Locks Mill and 2) provide an outlet for employees to share personal information.

Several solutions emerged. The first was to create clear categories of information instead of jumbling all announcements together. To eliminate the general clutter that can occur on a mill-wide bulletin board, we suggested a standard set of categories of mill-wide bulletin board usage. The categories could be highlighted in a standard way throughout the mill and might be named the following: Locks Mill News, Industry News, Employee News, and Personnel/Administrative News.

It was also suggested that an editor of the bulletin boards be appointed to monitor the information. Specifically, the editor would coordinate board news in every category except "employee news," which would be open to any employee.

There would also be set time limits for how long a message could be on the board. All bulletin boards should be completely cleared on a regular basis. Additionally, to increase the timeliness of the system, announcements could be color-coded to designate the day on which it was posted. Color-coding could help employees instantly determine if something new was added on the board.

The changes in the bulletin board system will be enacted in the future as part of a plant-wide strategy to improve information dissemination.

Stages 4 and 5

Many of the changes have been recently implemented. Informal feedback has been positive. Moreover, we recently administered another survey, which clearly indicated that top management has adopted these changes. Employees have indicated an increased awareness of the current "state of the mill" and its future growth objectives. They like knowing what the objectives are, how the mill is attempting to achieve them, and what part safety, productivity and quality play in meeting those objectives. The employees are beginning to see where they "fit in" and how "it all fits together." Changes in the *Locks News* and a new monthly report have been well received. The transformation process is far from complete. The next step for the mill is to address communication concerns of individual work teams. We are currently working on strategies to help supervisors and coordinators improve one-to-one communication. For instance, we want to make sure all employees can interpret organizational changes in light of core Locks Mill values. This is a communication concern that can only be dealt with on a person-to-person basis.

While significant progress has been made, improving the communication system will take many years. We are looking forward to the next challenge of transforming the communication system at the supervisor and employee levels.

Appendix I

Attributes of a world class communication system

Strategic commitment
- There is a strategic commitment from top management to promote and practice effective communication.
- There is a commitment by management and employees to uphold ethical standards for communication.

Skills
- Top management has the ability, desire and means to inspire a vision of corporate values in the employees.
- Employees have superior communication skills.
- Committees have superior communication skills in terms of how they communicate within the committee as well as to the rest of the plant.
- Employees know how they are performing against recognized standards of performance.

Channels
- The organization has an effective infrastructure of channels to meet key communication challenges.
- Channels used are compatible with employee needs and the message capacity of the channel.

Policies & procedures
- Employees know how they fit into the "big picture" and believe they are empowered to carry out the organizational mission.
- Dynamic programs are in place to make sure employee concerns are heard and acted on.
- Departments interact with one another effectively.
- The communication system is routinely evaluated.

Information management
- Employees have relatively easy access to all information they deem necessary, with some minor exceptions.
- Active measures are in place to ensure that employees receive relevant and timely information, but not more than necessary.
- There are "safety valves" built into the communication system to circumvent any communication breakdowns.