

Keys to Communication

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Introduction

The American swine industry is not experiencing any shortage of challenges. One major challenge revolves around the “people” aspect of the industry. The fact remains that no matter how many technological advances the industry sees, people will eventually have to implement those advances, leaving a business’s success, ultimately, in the hands of its employees.

When thinking about the human resource challenges a manager faces, it’s easy to recognize the difficulty in dealing with issues such as compensation, discipline, training, recruiting, selecting, and motivating a workforce. But no matter how varied each of these challenges seem on the surface, they all stem from the same root: communication.

Communication in the workplace is the single most important element in a successful work environment. From the small things like saying thank you to the huge elements such as communicating performance feedback, moving pieces of information throughout a business is essential for long-term success.

Remove barriers

There are several keys to communication in a workplace. The first is to remove any barriers to communication. An obvious example of this is the manager who tries to give an employee instructions while talking on a cellular phone with a bad connection. The employee hears about half of what the manager says because static is a barrier to communication. This is an obvious, physical, impediment to clear communication. But other barriers may not be so easy to diagnose. Bad blood between employees can cause one to skew what the other is saying. Misconceptions can also hinder communication, especially if all parties assume everyone is on the same page when they are not.

Maintain composure

An important key of particular importance when communicating is for all parties to maintain their composure at all times. Miscommunication can often be compounded when tempers flare out of control. When explaining processes or information, try saying it in several different ways, not just louder and slower. Remember, communication success is the responsibility of both the sender and the receiver. Maintaining composure can ensure that the message doesn’t get lost in the translation.

Find a common language

In modern agriculture there is certainly a heightened awareness of the importance of working with people with different native languages. Whether those languages include Spanish, English, German, Vietnamese, or others, managers are aware of this challenge and, in many cases, making an effort to help the business deal with it. But most managers are unaware of the fact that each industry, business, town, unit, family, can and will have languages of their own as well. In other words, just because a person speaks English, it doesn't mean he or she will speak "pig." Even if you are dealing with a person who has extensive swine experience, if that person is new to a particular business it will take him/her some time to adjust to the "shorthand" that may be used in that operation.

Shorthand is a good thing. The ability of a workforce to finish each other's sentences and communicate detailed information in as few words as possible is one sign of people who know their jobs, respect their coworkers, and are incredibly important to business success. But shorthand can be very confusing to people who are on the outside looking in. Establishing a common language for a business is the first step. Teaching that language to everyone involved with the business is the second.

Establish communication as a core value

In every successful business, communication is something that is routine, expected, and rewarded. It is an ingrained part of the business culture and the people in the business see communication as one of the core components of their jobs. To improve the communication within a business, establishing it as a core value would be very important to the process. Managers should make the commitment to establish a communication system, complete with checks and balances to make sure information flows as well as it should. Also, communication should be included as a part of a person or unit's performance objectives. In addition, communication should be rewarded. Certainly, people who typically receive performance bonuses probably have excellent communication in order to perform so well, but making communication itself something that is rewarded will help reiterate to everyone involved in an operation that communication is a core value.

Utilize communication instruments

One common misconception about communication is that it has to be spoken. That is quite untrue. Some of the most successful operations in this country have employees who communicate constantly with each other without ever saying a word. Identification systems, charts, records, and other signals or clues can allow one employee to tell every other employee who passes that way what has been seen or done. These tools are very important to the flow of information. Other communication instruments may seem more traditional and can require more effort, particularly on the part of managers. But they do show long-term rewards.

Written documents such as job descriptions and employee handbooks are essential for today's operations from not only a legal standpoint but also for effective management. By having things such as a job's requirements, expectations, and standards in writing, employees are far more likely to have a clear understanding of what it will take to be successful in a position. Likewise, an employee handbook that includes items such as the business's policy on sexual harassment and the details of the business's philosophy on animal welfare will, essentially, lay a business's cards out on the table. Employees who review the handbook will be informed of many important business policies in one place at one time. Again, this is favorable from both management and legal standpoints.

Perhaps the most underused communication instrument is the meeting. Staff meetings can be as long or as short, as frequent or as infrequent as they need to be but they must happen, if only to serve as an opportunity for all parties to be in the same place at the same time. Many managers consider this as a time to "circle the wagons" and allow everyone within a team to communicate face-to-face if only for a very short time.

Provide training

The most important communication that happens in an employee's tenure with a business occurs within the first thirty days. That is when the employee learns the culture, practices, and philosophy of the business. Without full and complete training, most employees will fail. It is only a matter of time.

Of course, training is a time-consuming and frequently frustrating process. It is easy to ask a new employee to "shadow" current employees for a day or two, picking up key lessons along the way and then after a couple of weeks, call that person fully trained. However, that is not the best situation for the new employee or the business. It takes one full production cycle for an employee to see everything that is commonplace within the operation and one full year for him/her to experience the seasonal differences that are common within agriculture. After all, the situations an employee encounters during the month of July may be very different than those he/she will see in February.

The most important part of training is not the process itself, but rather, the communication between managers, existing employees, and newer members of the team as to what is going on and what can be expected, especially during stressful periods. New employees will need and want to be in the loop, if only to understand what is happening and how it will affect them.

Offer orientation

It is easier to correct a mistake than change a habit. Most managers will agree with this statement. An orientation period and process is the ideal time to stop bad habits from forming. This is the period in which items such as compensation elements, time off, tardiness, animal welfare, and other important issues are discussed. Every business should set some time aside for new employees to ask questions about the business, the terms of their employment, and what they should expect from their jobs.

Have a system for feedback and evaluation

Research has shown that feedback is the element of employee satisfaction that some employees struggle with the most. The ironic thing is, it is the element of satisfaction over which employers have the most control. It is impossible to talk about the keys to business communication without discussing feedback and evaluation. Having a formal system for feedback, meaning a designated time when managers and employees sit across from one another and discuss performance, will ensure that this happens. Of course, informal feedback, meaning that performance is discussed casually whenever the opportunity arises, is vital to business success but, unfortunately, those opportunities are frequently missed when operations are short-staffed or managers have other, more pressing, issues to deal with.

What is the magic formula for feedback and evaluation? There really is none. It depends upon the personalities and philosophies of the manager, the employee, and the business itself. But no matter what that formula looks like, it should probably include both formal and informal elements. Like most aspects of communication, the hardest part about feedback and evaluation is simply doing it. It may be awkward. It could sometimes be tense. But it is vital if you intend to have a satisfied and self-sufficient workforce.

Communicate!

What is the hardest part about communication? Remembering to do it. Marriages fail, employees leave, friends grow apart all because people forget to communicate. The number one key to communication is just doing it, even if that means doing it badly. If there is something someone needs to know, tell them, show them, help them to understand. People aren't mind readers. They may be busy and they may be stressed but they will usually stop what they are doing to learn, to share, and to communicate when given the opportunity.