7 Public Relations: Employee and Consumer Relations

- ❑ Introduction to employee and consumer relations

- ❑ Dealing with the employee publics

- ❑ Communicating effectively

- ❑ Employee communications: Strategy

- ❑ Employee communications: Tactics

- ❑ Understand and explain the public relationship with the consumers

- ❑ Understand the objectives and the consumer movements

Objectives

At the end of the topic, students are able to:

- Understand the ways of dealing with the employee publics
- Communicating effectively pertaining to public relations
- Understand and explain strategy and tactics in employee communications
- Understand and explain the public relationship with the consumers
- Understand the objectives and the consumers movements

7.1 INTRODUCTION TO EMPLOYEE AND CONSUMER RELATION

Employee Relations involves the body of work concerned with maintaining employer-employee relationships that contribute to satisfactory productivity, motivation, and morale. Essentially, Employee Relations is concerned with preventing and resolving problems involving individuals who arise out of or affect work situations.

Advice is provided to supervisors on how to correct poor performance and employee misconduct. In such instances, progressive discipline and regulatory and other requirements must be considered in effecting disciplinary actions and in resolving employee grievances and appeals. Information is provided to employees to promote a better understanding of management's goals and policies. Information is also provided to employees to assist them in correcting poor performance, on or off duty misconduct, and/or to address personal issues that affect them in the workplace. Employees are advised about applicable regulations, legislation, and bargaining agreements. Employees are also advised about their grievance and appeal rights and discrimination and whistleblower protections.

Consumer relations occur when the producer or the company producing goods or services builds a good relationship with its consumers or buyers of their products or services. The relationship is needed to influence the sale of their products or services. There are several consumer relations objectives that will be further discussed in this chapter.

7.2 DEALING WITH THE EMPLOYEE PUBLICS

The employee public is made up of different subgroups namely senior managers, first-line supervisors, staff and line employees, women and minority workers, union labourers, per diem employees, contract workers and others. Each of this group has different concerns and interest. A smart company will always try to differentiate messages and communications to reach these segments of employee.

In today's business world, the staffs are younger, increasingly in women workers, more ambitious and career oriented, less complacent, and less loyal to the company than in the past. Today's more hard-nosed employee demands candour in communications. Internal communications, like external messages, must be targeted to reach specific subgroups of the employee publics.

7.3   COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY
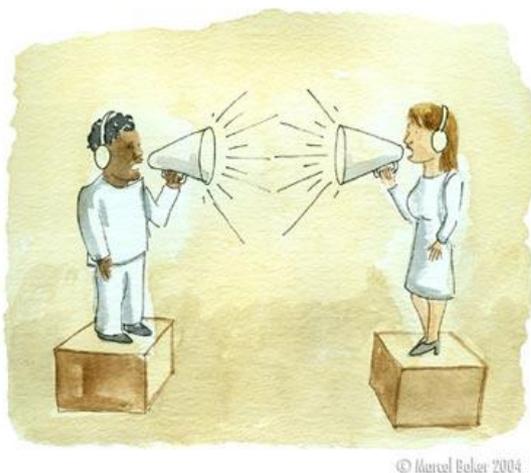
Many of the problems that occur in an organization are the direct result of people failing to communicate. Faulty communication causes the most problems. It leads to confusion and can cause a good plan to fail. Communication is the exchange and flow of information and ideas from one person to another. It involves a sender transmitting an idea to a receiver. Effective communication occurs only if the receiver understands the exact information or idea that the sender intended to transmit.

Studying the communication process is important because you coach, coordinate, counsel, evaluate, and supervise through this process. It is the chain of understanding that integrates the members of an organization from top to bottom, bottom to top, and side to side.

An organization that is truly concerned about "getting through" to its employees in an era of downsizing, displacement, and dubious communications must reinforce five specific principles:

- **Honest feedback.** By informing workers about their strengths and weaknesses, employee will know where they stand at any given time. Candid communications will help them in this pursuit. An example is when an employer gives feedback of the staff on their strengths and weaknesses after a performance appraisal being conducted.

▪ **Respect.** All employees must be respected for their worth as individuals and their value as workers. They must be treated fairly and with respect and not as interchangeable commodities. Example, an employee must be appraised fairly without looking at their skins and racial.

▪ **Recognition.** Employees feel successful and appreciated when management recognizes their contributions. It is the duty and responsibility of the public relations professionals to suggest mechanisms by which deserving employees will be honoured. Example, employees who preformed excellently must be rewarded by company. A Company can reward these employees by giving a salary increment, bonuses or recognition.

▪ **A voice.** Today, in the era of television and radio talk shows, almost everyone wants their opinion and ideas to be heard and they want their ideas to be involved in the decision making process.

▪ **Encouragement.** Encouragement also benefits in motivating employees to perform their best. Workers need to be encouraged. Communications programs that can provide encouragement generally produce results. For example, a company can encourage their employees to perform excellently by providing salary increments and other benefits as a matter of encouragement.
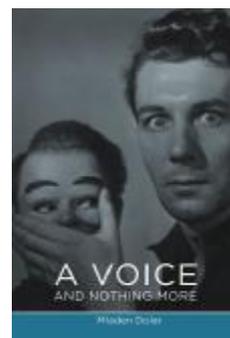
7.4   EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS: STRATEGY

An employee likes to hear the truth, especially in person. This is why credibility is so important for both the employer and employee. Employees also want to know, candidly how they are doing. Research have indicated that trust in an organization would increase if management (1) communicated earlier and more frequently, for example, provide employees with feedback about their performance after an performance appraisal, (2) demonstrated trust in employees by sharing bad news as well as good, and (3) involve employee in the process of decision making by asking for their ideas and opinions.

Enhancing credibility, being candid and winning trust must be the primary employee communication objective in the new era. Gaining employee trust may result in more productive and committed employees. There are five elements in a strategic program:

- **Survey employees' attitudes regularly.** Companies need to regularly do internal communications audits and attitude surveys so that they can identify problems before they become a crisis.

- **Be consistent.** Management must promise open and honest communication to all its employees. Communication made by the company must be consistent and believed by all its employees. This means that the company must always tell the truth to their employees whether the news is good or bad.

- **Personalize communication.** It is important for the company to have face-to-face communication with its employee because workers need personal attention from those for whom they work.

- **Be candid.** In today's working environment, there is an increase in young workers, less educated, less loyal and more women, immigrants and minorities than workers of the past.

- **Be innovative.** New patterns in workforce and increases in scepticism in the workplace demand new communication solutions. This means resorting to new technology – voice, video, data transmission on PCs and so on, to counteract the trust gap.

7

7.5   EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS

Once objectives are identified, a variety of techniques can be adopted to reach the staff. Before any communications program can be implemented, communicators must have a good sense of staff attitudes. There are certain tactics that a company can use to communicate with their employees:

- ▪ *Internal communication.*

  - ▪ Internal communication is the beneficial form of research on which to create a good and effective communication with their employee.

  - ▪ Internal communication starts up with personal, in-depth interviews with both top management and communicators.

  - ▪ Audits helps organizations to determine their employee attitudes about their jobs, the organization, and its mission, coupled with an analysis of existing communications techniques. The findings can be very informative and beneficial to company.

- ▪ *Online communications*

  - ▪ Online communication is also capable of reaching their virtual employees at their desk, in their homes or in their cars, or wherever they remotely may be.

  - ▪ Using online communications can be very convenient, quick and effective because nowadays print publications become fewer and fewer.
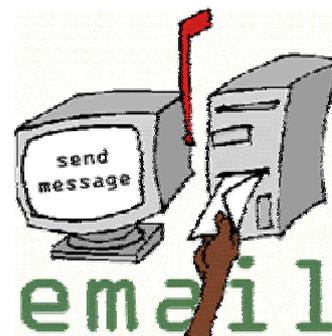
- ▪ *The intranet*

  - ▪ An intranet is a restricted-access network that works like the Web, but is not on it. Usually owned and managed by a company, an intranet enables a company to share its resources with its employees without confidential information being made available to everyone with Internet access.

  - ▪ Having an intranet site, does not mean employees will necessarily go there for information. Sites high in visual appeal but low in usefulness will likely be ignored. To prevent that, intranet creators should keep in mind several important considerations like:

- Consider the culture – the website should take into consideration the company's culture where it will have no trouble getting people to contribute information and materials to the intranet.

- Set clear objectives and then let it evolve – the intranet must be designed with clear goals in mind: to streamline business processes, to communicate management messages, and so on.

- Market, market, market – the intranets needs to be sold within the company. Publicize new features or changes in content.

- Link to outside lives – The intranets must be linked to classified ads, restaurant and movie reviews, and information on local concerts are ways to reinforce both the intranet's value and the organization's concern for its staff.

- Senior management must commit – Without top executive support, the idea will totally fail. Perceived value of an organization's intranet will increase dramatically if management actively supports and uses it.

- *Print publications*

  o It varies from one organization to another, and it must be remembered that, whether print or online, employees' newsletters should appear regularly, on time, and with a consistent format.
  o One reason why this type of publication survives is that they serve as a ready vehicle for management to explain the company's philosophy and policies.
  o In the 21st century, it is especially important that such newsletters provide a two-way communication, expressing not only management's wishes but staffs' concerns as well.

- *Bulletin boards*

  o Bulletin boards are used to display required information and policy data for such activities as fire drills and emergency procedures.
  o Most of the time, bulletin boards are used to improve productivity, cut waste, and reduce accidents on the job.

7

▪ *Employee annual report*

- o Employee annual report is a separate annual report just for employees.
- o This annual report will inform employees about the company's situation because most employees do care about how their company functions and what its management is thinking.
- o The Employee annual report also acts as a good medium for employees to discuss such issues informally, yet candidly. The report can be both factual, explaining the performance of the organization during the year, and informational, reviewing organisational changes and its significant milestone during the year.

▪ *Face-to-face supervisory communications*

- o Most of the employees want clear explanations direct from their supervisors. Supervisors, in fact, are the preferred source for 90 percent of employees, making them the top choice by far. The reason is because your supervisor, who awards your raise, promotes you and is your primary source of corporate information.
- o Thus, most employees prefer information from their supervisor over what they learn through rumours.

▪ *Suggestion box*

- o One of the old traditional communication tactics is by using suggestion boxes.
- o Suggestion boxes are mounted on each floor, and employees often anonymously, deposit their thoughts on how to improve the company and its processes and products. Often rewards are awarded for the most productive or profitable suggestions.

7.6   WHO ARE CONSUMERS?

Consumers are the people who buy the products or services produced by certain companies. They are the ones who contribute lifelong to the company. The company should carefully consider their requirements in order to satisfy their needs. Without their support, the company cannot sell and make profit out of their products or services.

7.7   CONSUMER RELATIONS OBJECTIVES

The primary consumer relations objectives are to build or increase the company's sales. A very satisfied customer may return to the company, while an unhappy customer may not.

Goals of consumer relations are:

- *Keeping old customers* – Most of the sales are made to established customers. Consumer relations efforts should be made to keep these customers happy.

- *Attracting new customers* – Every business is designed to steadily develop and attract new customers. Most of the industries may offer prices and quality which is just about the same. In choosing brands, customers may base their decisions on how they have been treated, for example, the customer service provided by the company.

- *Marketing new items or services* – Customer relations techniques can influence the sales of new products or services. Thousands of new products flood the market each year, and the vast array of information about these products can confuse the consumer. Building such company and product loyalty lies at the heart of a solid consumer relations effort.

- *Expediting complaint handling.* Most companies have their own complaints. Customers make complaints if the product or services that they bought did not satisfy their needs, or are not working properly. Complaints can be made because of errors in billing or deliveries are not made in time. Most large companies have established a response procedure.

- *Reducing costs.* Most companies really appreciate educated consumers. These companies believe that educated consumers are the best consumers because uninformed consumers cost a company time and money. This happens when goods are returned, service calls are made and instructions are misunderstood. So, in order to avoid such problems, many companies have adopted programs to educate their valued customers about the use of their products and services.

7

7.8   THE CONSUMER RIGHTS

A responsible consumer is a consumer who is aware of his/her rights as a consumer, and acts judiciously (wisely) and with full responsibility. The eight key consumer rights according to the Malaysian perspective are:

- *The rights to acquire fundamental needs*

The consumer has the rights to obtain fundamental goods and services to guarantee a satisfactory life in today's modern world. These fundamental needs include safe and sufficient food supply, clothes, housing, health facility, education, among others.

- *The rights to acquire safety rights*

The consumer is protected from the processing and marketing of goods as well as services, which can be harmful.
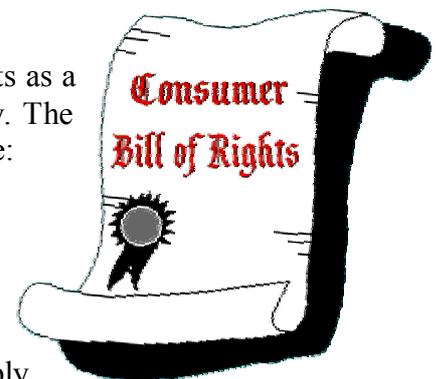
- *The rights to acquire information*

The consumer must be provided with sufficient and precise information to assist him/ her in making the right decision. The consumer is also protected against false advertising, labelling and other fraudulent and manipulative acts.

- *The rights to make a decision*

The consumer reserves the rights to direct information with regards to all goods and services. The consumer must be given due explanation to enable him/ her to make the rights choices and decisions. There must be a guarantee to determine quality and satisfactory services, at a reasonable price.

- *The rights to voice out*

This is to ensure that the interest of the customers is taken into consideration, with regard to any legislation on government policies, as well as prompt and fair responses from the relevant complaints administrators.

- *The rights to claim for damages*

The consumer has the rights for compensation in relation to damaged and harmful products, trading activities that are confusing, as well as manipulative services. Due compensation should be awarded to the consumer for products and services which endanger and harm the consumer, upon following the instructions given by the manufacturer. Compensations should also be given to consumers who are victimized due to their employers' negligence.

- *The rights to obtain consumer education*

The consumer has the rights to obtain sufficient and continuous consumer education. This is because the education system does not place emphasis to consumer education. The philosophy on consumer education today is more inclined to train the public on how to be an efficient worker or employer, rather than on how to be a good consumer.

- *The rights to acquire safe and healthy environment*

The consumer has the rights to live and work in a clean and healthy environment, free from hazardous and harmful conditions. This rights has been the strongly advocated by consumers as the levels of pollution index have been increasing, and that parts of nature itself has been either in the process of extinction or destroyed

7.9   EXERCISE

Section A: Short answer questions.

1. An Employee is the most important aspect in an organization. What do you think are factors that contribute to effectiveness of communicating with employees?

2. Briefly explain the employee communication strategies.

3. An Employer can use different kinds of medium to communicate with their employees. Suggest some of the communication tactics that can be used by the organization in order to communicate with their employees.

4. What is online communication? Provide examples of online communication.

5. What is intranet? What are the uses of intranet and what are several important considerations for intranet creators?

6. Provide examples of print publications in an office.

7