

Communicating to Build Community: How Communications Departments Can Help Create a Better Workplace

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Introduction

Through my work in the University Communications Unit, I have discovered how integral Internal Communications is to a workplace and how much work goes into creating the community and culture through the different tools at their disposal.

There are many different benefits to building a community in the workplace, creating a more effective, efficient and productive place that recognizes employees for both their hard work and their individuality – creating a culture of respect in an organization where each group understands the importance of the others, and how they depend on each other.

While there are many different tools that Internal Communications can utilize to foster communication methods throughout an organization, I have chosen three that I believe to be of great importance to build a foundation of community building off – intranets, newsletters and news or blog articles.

In this project, I examine the importance of developing a sense of community in the workplace, especially in a segmented, diverse and large workplace like a university, how it can benefit everyone involved, and how internal communications department can effectively do so.



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Definitions

In order to properly discuss why it is important for to build community in the workplace and discuss the different methods to be used, it is define exactly what is meant by 'community' and 'internal communications'

Community:

In Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anunden's book entitled *Creating Community Anywhere* and the define community as "a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people: participates in common practices, depend upon one another, make decisions together, identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships; and commit themselves for a long term to their own, one another's and the group's well-being" (10).

They praise the idea of a *conscious community* where "each individual and group functions as a whole system within a larger whole. Each is complete in itself, yet is dependent upon the systems within it and beyond it. In this sense, community is like a living body" (11). This facet of their definition is especially important in the university structure, where everything is divided into colleges and departments, as well as between students, faculty and staff.

In simpler terms, and for our purposes, a *community* is a group of individuals or systems who come together with a common purpose, working together for the good of the larger group, that is made up of individuals and smaller groups that are interdependent on each other and the larger system.

Internal Communications:

Internal Communications is the department that is responsible for keeping "employees informed and engaged about everything that is going on in their organizations" and is "responsible for effective communication among participants within an organization" (Martic). While in some companies, there will be communications specialists that function in this role, it is something that can be completed by human resources, team managers or top management (Martic).

When dealing with large organizations, such as a university, with many employees who are all separated into different groups, internal communications becomes very important to making communication between leaders and employees, or among the employees themselves, easier, more efficient and effective. Internal Communications helps create better employee engagement, satisfaction, and productivity as well as collaboration between different departments

Internal Communications is important because "when employees have a clear understanding of the impact of their work on business, they feel values and even more motivated to go the extra mile" (Jouany)

Why Community is Important in the Workplace

Having a strong community in the workplace is beneficial for a variety of reasons, but for productivity but also for the well-being of employees. In Charlotte Wood's study examining the *emotional* well-being of employees in higher education, she notes that "those in regular employment typically spend so much of their time doing work and at work, the workplace potentially represents a significant source of pain, pleasure, frustration and fulfillment" (172). In a conscious community, both employees and employers work together, respecting each other's value.

Respecting Employees

Shaffer & Anundsen note in their book that organizations paying attention to their employees, "including them at all levels in the visioning and decision-making process, and providing a supportive work environment pays high dividends, monetary as well as psychological" (114). Employees who feel more connected to their place of employment are more likely to feel like their job is important, making them more productive, efficient and innovative. They are more likely to go the extra mile for their employer, because they are working towards a shared goal rather than a bottom line. Respecting employees as people with lives outside of work instead of just a cog in a machine goes a long way to fostering that sense of community.

Solving Workplace Bullying

As well as creating a sense of respect between the high levels of the organization and the employees, creating a sense of community can also help cut back workplace bullying, something that is prevalent especially in institutes of higher learning. Hollis, in a comparative study between the U.S.A and Canada concludes that "the focus should be on prevention" and that "true changes occurs when leadership, reflecting the emergence of broader cultural vales, is committed to prevention and prohibiting workplace bullying at the organizational level" (130). By creating a sense of community, where everyone is cognizant of how each department and job relies on others and works together, it can help diminish workplace bullying that might take place due to perceived judgement on the importance of one's position over the other.

Methods to Foster Community through Internal Communications

Internal Communications (IC) can play a big role in creating that sense of community and togetherness. There are several different IC tools that can help foster community building in the workplace:

Intranet: An intranet is a "private enterprise network, designed to support an organization's employees to communicate, collaborate, and perform their roles" (Hall). In today's day and age, an intranet is an website designed for a specific company that incorporates many different features, which might include social media-like features, important updates or articles, ways to access important information - like checklists for new hires or how to get purchasing information, etc.- employee charts, private messaging, user profiles, blogs, communications from higher management. They can provide many different functions that allow organizations to communicate information more efficient to employees, and allow them to communicate more effectively with each other, or find needed information.

Newsletters: regular newsletters are a great way to communicate information to employees in an efficient, friendly way. There are many different things to include in a newsletter that can create that community feeling. When looking into best practices for newsletters, the most common advice put forward by experts is to make them fun and focused on the employees, rather than the company. The ideal newsletters emphasizes the company culture and the shared values of the organization, reminding the employees of what the common goal may be. Information sharing is also important throughout the organization, avoiding making some employees feel out of the loop, or slighted because they missed something, which newsletters can help inform everyone at the same time. They can also share information about company events, wellness information, important employment notices, special speakers, etc. Finally, newsletters can help make individuals feel noticed and valuable, if the company takes the time to potentially include birthdays, or anniversaries if it is a smaller company, spotlight different departments or teams, and recognize employee achievements in a way that communicates them to the entire organization.

News Articles/Blog Posts: Other than just including important information on the newsletter, IC can also write articles or posts focusing on important things happening around the organization, or just important wellness or safety tips. By highlighting employees and their specific achievements, it communicates the value the organization places on their employees as individuals, which can lead to more people working to gain that achievement. It can also communicate what each department does to the rest of the organization, through things like "a day in the life in" or a highlight of their current project.

These methods are very interconnected. The news articles can be hosted on the intranet, which is the method of sending the newsletters, which can provide users the links to the different news articles. Fostering community through communication can use these tools are ways to develop many different strategies to help their employees feel like individuals apart of a community instead of a identical cog in the machine.

Conclusions

The workplace has moved past being "profit-driven machines and workers as expendable parts" instead turning to view "organizations as living systems driven by people, their needs and their vision" (Shaffer & Anundsen 114).

It has been shown that creating a community within the workplace, a place full of communication, respect, individuality and interdependence is beneficial for both the workers and the organization, leading to a more productive, efficient and happier workplace. It leads to more tolerance and respect for fellow employees, can make them feel more valued and reduce rates of workplace bullying, as a result of clear company culture of respect and interdependence.

Internal Communications is an essential part of creating this feeling of community because their job is focused on creating and fostering the communication throughout the organization. There are many different tools that IC can utilize in their efforts, but three foundational tools would be intranet, newsletters and news articles – all tools designed to aid communication at all levels, help employees socialize with each other, and place a spotlight on individuals at a company level, giving them the recognition that will help them feel valued.

These tools bring a more personal level of communication to an organization, which is important to fostering community – recognizing workers as more than just apart of the corporate structure. That is the true power in Internal Communications – without communication, there can be no community – and IC helps create the tools to bring all the benefits to their organization.



Image from WebStockReview.Com

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