

Effective Workplace Communication



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Labour Department

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Foreword

Effective communication is an important channel for building interpersonal relationships which is equally essential in workplaces. Setting up and implementing appropriate communication mode tailored to employees' needs not only fosters the organisation's smooth operation but also boosts employees' efficiency and sense of belonging while enhancing mutual understanding and trust. This will lay a solid foundation for organisational development.

As close and long-term working partners, employers and employees should keep on having candid exchanges with a view to maintaining good labour relations. To enhance their understanding of the benefits brought by effective communication and consultation, the Labour Department is committed to promoting measures suitable for the labor situation in Hong Kong as well as encouraging voluntary joint consultation between employers and employees and their associations. Through a wide range of activities, the Labour Department publicises the basic employment conditions stipulated under the Employment Ordinance and promotes good human resource management practices for effective employer-employee communication, thereby creating an environment conducive to communication and consultation.

The Labour Department has commissioned Hong Kong Economic Times to compile this casebook which features the distinctive modes of communication adopted by employers, management staff and employees in six organisations of different scales and sectors. The communication modes are established having regard to the characteristics, modus operandi, affordability and staffing conditions of the respective organisations. Apart from implementing effective communication mechanisms such as regular work meetings, inter-departmental working groups and staff associations, many organisations have moved with the times by exploring more suitable channels for information exchanges. Besides, the small and medium enterprises or even micro enterprises can make use of the advantage of their "small scale" to strengthen the bonding and cohesion with employees and thus optimise the benefits of effective communication between both parties.

We hope that employers and human resource personnel in all sectors can set up appropriate communication modes and mechanisms in collaboration with employees having regard to the needs and circumstances of individual organisations. With a solid foundation for communication, employers and employees can maintain candid, direct and ongoing exchanges as well as develop cooperative and harmonious labour relations. That will enhance the competitiveness of the organisation and allow both parties to share the reward of business success.

Extracts

“No matter how technologies can transform the communication mode, face-to-face communication is irreplaceable.”

Jackson Leung, Chief Executive Officer of C&C Joint Printing Co., (H.K.) Limited

“I always call my employees “colleagues” rather than “subordinates” both internally and externally. By treating them as equals, I hope to encourage them to proactively give their views and reflect problems.”

Eddie Yeung, Director of CFuCome Limited

“Information technology can facilitate the exchange of ideas and information between the company and its employees, leading to better mutual understanding for achieving the common goals together.”

Dr. Aaron Chiang, Head of Human Resources & Administration of Hong Yip Service Company Limited

“Staff opinions are collected through various channels and taken seriously so as to build mutual trust between CFSC and its employees. This will also encourage employees to express their views.”

Gloria Chan, Human Resources Director of Christian Family Service Centre

“As employees spend most of their time in the office, the company should enhance its internal communication by way of “the software” and “the hardware” for employers and employees to get along with one other.”

Terry Fan, Executive Director of Sunta Chemical Limited

“We consider “listening” as the key to workplace communication and use flexible means to encourage employees to freely express their opinions through various channels.”

Canace Lin, Chief Marketing Officer and Executive Director of CATALO Natural Health Foods Limited

All-out Reticulated Communication of C&C Creates an Atmosphere of Diversity and Openness

The development of Hong Kong's printing industry owes much to the close communication and consultation between employers and employees. The industry concluded a collective agreement in as early as 1947. C&C Joint Printing Co., (H.K.) Ltd. has many subsidiaries and sales offices in Hong Kong, the Mainland, Japan, Australia, Europe and the United States, etc. Hiring about 220 local employees in Hong Kong, C&C attaches great importance to effective communication with employees, and regards it as the key to achieving the corporate culture of "Solidarity and Collaboration, Continuous Improvement, Pursuit of Excellence".

Jackson Leung, Chief Executive Officer of C&C, reckons that a good communication mechanism can enhance employees' recognition of entrepreneurship, thereby improving their daily work efficiency and boosting the enterprise's competitiveness.

Reticulated communication mechanism allows employees to bypass superiors in expressing opinions

Effective communication should start with internal communication within the corporation. Communication between the management and the supervisors at all levels, departments, and employees is of utmost importance. "The establishment of effective two-way communication channels can deepen the understanding between employers and employees and so build up a work culture of unity in the company." Jackson Leung points out that, unlike the traditional top-down, "vertical" communication mode, C&C adopts a diversified, open and "reticulated" communication mechanism, allowing employees to "bypass superiors" in expressing opinions in a bid to create a communication-friendly environment.

In an atmosphere that welcomes diversified and open communication, C&C employees can directly express their comments via letter boxes or make suggestions and opinions on business strategies to their superiors or management. Department heads will also facilitate communication among employees by using the group chat function of instant messaging software during office hours to minimise unnecessary meetings.

"Nevertheless, no matter how technologies can transform the communication mode, face-to-face communication is irreplaceable." As management, Jackson Leung takes the lead in talking with employees at all levels. Even when he is on overseas business trips, he will meet the colleagues there, and if time permits, dine with them to enhance mutual understanding.

Proper communication helps resolve problems

The “reticulated” communication mode has gained industry-wide popularity. As the backbone member of the Hong Kong printing industry, C&C cares much about the industry’s business and development, and actively nominates employees and management representatives to join trade union and chamber of commerce to promote communication among enterprises, chambers of commerce and trade union. For instance, Jackson Leung has been Vice-Chairman of the Hong Kong Printers Association for many years and all long conveyed the industry’s views and direction of development to the company. A C&C employee has also joined the trade union of the industry to closely convey to the employer the problems identified by them.

Apart from enhancing labour relations, effective communication also allows employers to respond and make improvement promptly after learning about the demands and problems of their employees. Gerita Lam, Deputy Manager of Personnel and Administration Department at C&C, says that the Personnel and Administration Department collects opinions and demands from employees on issues such as the implementation of five-day work week, granting of other holidays like wedding leave and compassionate leave, etc. for the management’s consideration. All these measures were proposed by employees and then adopted by the management. They not only bring benefits to our existing employees, but may also add to the company’s attractiveness in recruiting new blood.

C&C employees also have proper communication with the employer about their work and remuneration. For instance, at the employees’ request for an increase in overtime allowance, the management consulted different departments and agreed that increasing the overtime allowance could subsidise employees’ income as well as enhance their willingness to work overtime to ease the shortage of frontline manpower. Consequently, the request was acceded to and a win-win situation was achieved.

Tips to Success

- Remove the top-down, one-way vertical communication mode to make way for diversified and “reticulated” communication between the enterprise and employees as well as among employees themselves.
- Actively nominate employees to join trade union to convey to the company the industry’s opinions and suggestions.
- Regularly collect opinions and demands from employees so that both the employer and employees can understand the needs and difficulties of each other for working out appropriate solutions together.

CFuCome’s Humanised Management Breaks Communication Barriers in the Workplace

Unlike large enterprises, micro enterprises have only a few employees and can hardly establish a distinct organisational structure and a human resource management system. Having well awareness of this, CFuCome Limited adopts a humanised management style to reduce barriers and facilitate smooth employer-employee communication in the workplace.

Established in 2015, CFuCome operates a mobile app for repairs and minor works services for customers. With as few as eight employees currently, each one of them has to handle diverse and unexpected situations. At the same time, given the creativity required for developing the app and promoting their services, it is vitally important to share and discuss with colleagues instantly and directly about any ideas and concepts that may come to them in a flash of inspiration. As such, Eddie Yeung, Director of CFuCome, is convinced that direct communication is the most efficient and effective way of workplace communication.

Open-plan Office Design

CFuCome’s open-plan office design facilitates face-to-face communication among colleagues. Yeung explains, “Most of the traditional companies use walls and partitions to separate the management from the employees. These tangible boundaries create an intangible psychological barrier between the superiors and subordinates as well as among colleagues. Many colleagues even communicate with the co-workers next to them by phone or by e-mail!” This has prompted him to set up an office with no boundaries so that employees are not physically and mentally restrained in the workplace. In order to enhance employee cohesion, he has installed a free beverage machine in the pantry so that they can relax and connect while taking a short break.

In response to views that open-plan offices leave employees with little privacy, Yeung adds that there are rooms in the office for processing important documents and meeting employees privately, which can help maintain an appropriate degree of privacy while providing rooms for exchanges between colleagues. Besides, to avoid any sense of hierarchy, he usually spends more time to work in the open-plan office and communicate with employee proactively.

Promoting Peer-like Relationship

“I always call my employees ‘colleagues’ rather than ‘subordinates’ both internally and externally. By treating them as equals, I hope to encourage them to proactively give their views and reflect problems for better business development,” he stresses. He points out that as most of the employees belong to the post-90s generation, he has learned the buzzwords used by young people to

bridge the generation gap. Mandy Ho, Senior Operations Manager at CFuCome, says, “An open-plan office facilitates face-to-face conversation between colleagues and thus simplifies the message delivery process. It is even more convenient and efficient than electronic communication tools.”

Besides, Yeung reckons that listening is a crucial element of successful communication. “I once pointed out the performance problems of a colleague openly. Afterwards some colleagues told me that what I did made that colleague feel disrespected. Since then, whenever I spot any problems with a colleague, I will talk with him or her in private with due consideration for his or her feelings.” He says that after the incident, colleagues have paid more attention to details in communication, including listening to each other’s opinions attentively and caring about each other’s feelings.

As the business grows, the number of employees will be increased to 15 in 2018. Yeung says that aside from keeping the open-plan office, the company will also gradually optimise the ways of communication, such as devising a human resource management programme so that newcomers can have a better understanding of the company’s culture and operation.

Tips to Success

- Adopt a “No Boundaries” open-plan workplace to facilitate face-to-face communication between employees and thus simplify the message delivery process.
- Superiors and subordinates treat each other as equals so that both parties can directly give their views or reflect problems without multiple relays of messages. This ensures more accurate message delivery for positive two-way communication.
- As most of the employees belong to the post-90s generation, the company director takes the lead in learning the buzzwords used by young people to bridge the generation gap.

Hong Yip Capitalises on Information Technology to Build a Mobile Communication Platform

It is not easy to establish an effective means of communication in the workplace, not to mention among different properties under its management. The property management industry has a large number of employees who take up frontline posts at properties throughout the territory. What kind of effective communication plan should be devised for the industry? Information technology provides an effective solution for keeping up with the times. The following is the experience shared by Hong Yip Service Company Limited.

Dr. Aaron Chiang, Head of Human Resources & Administration at Hong Yip, believes that information technology can facilitate the exchange of ideas and information between the company and its employees, leading to better mutual understanding for achieving the common goals together.

Ensure Complete Information Transmission

Effective communication is crucial to Hong Yip which has nearly 7,000 employees working in more than 300 work locations. In view of the large number of employees and work locations, Hong Yip maintains close contact with them through a brand new way of communication in addition to the traditional way of giving routine work orders. The company capitalises on the information technology expertise of the group's technology subsidiary to develop a mobile app called "VCom" for information dissemination, staff training, company activity announcement and views collection. Dr. Chiang points out that every employee of the company can browse the contents shown in "VCom" according to their own operational needs after downloading the mobile app. The company will also provide training on the use of the mobile app for the employees in need. However, the use of "VCom" is not mandatory and there are no strict rules about their browsing duration and frequency.

"In the past, company information might be partially lost in multiple relays of information and so failed to reach frontline colleagues in full." Dr. Chiang indicates that after the introduction of "VCom", company information can be uploaded directly to the mobile app without any omission and employees at different work locations can receive the information. "The property management industry operates 24 hours a day and has to cope with unexpected situations such as typhoons and rainstorms at any time. In this respect, 'VCom' can provide useful real-time information to frontline staff."

Enhance Service Quality through Interactive Exchanges

Besides, “VCom” can help strengthen staff training. Dr. Chiang cites the example of the “Customer Service Competition” held in recent years to promote the culture of service appreciation through remarkable customer service cases involving frontline colleagues. “The competition has received active participation from employees, who will film and upload their cases to the mobile app. Through this interesting way of sharing, other colleagues can learn and enhance service quality as well as efficiency.”

Angela, who works in the corporate communications department of Hong Yip, says, “Before the launch of “VCom”, voting on the company’s internal competitions was mainly conducted by e-mail or return slips. Counting of votes was time-consuming. Since “VCom” provides an efficient and direct way of voting and counting, employees participation is greater.” She describes “VCom” as a practical and interactive platform specially designed for employees. As the app does not involve work allocation and orders, employees will definitely not be under any pressure to keep abreast of its contents. They therefore give positive feedback to “VCom” and are happy to use it.

Tips to Success

- Capitalise on the group’s technology subsidiary to develop the mobile app “VCom”, a brand new communication platform.
- The mobile app is easy and simple to use for employees of different educational backgrounds and ages, thereby making communication between the company and its employees more effective.
- The app is comprehensive, covering company information, internal elections, management sharing, training videos, volunteer services and customer service cases sharing. Employees’ work efficiency is directly enhanced.

CFSC Attaches Great Importance to Communication and Works Closely with Staff Association

Located in Kwun Tong, the Christian Family Service Centre (CFSC) provides a broad range of welfare services mainly for the East Kowloon community and is dedicated to supporting and enhancing family functioning. As a social service agency with 1,200 employees, CFSC treats every one of them as a member of the big family. Through an effective communication system and in collaboration with the Staff Association, it fosters the sense of belonging among employees and to create a caring work environment for staff development.

Gloria Chan, Human Resources Director of CFSC, says the organisation attaches great importance to establishing good employees relations. Staff opinions are collected through various channels and taken seriously so as to build mutual trust between CFSC and its employees. This will also encourage employees to express their views.

Flexible human resources policies to show care for employees

CFSC always treasures its employees. For instance, newcomers are invited to attend New Staff Orientation at the head office so as to know more about CFSC's mission, values, organisational structure and operation. During the event, the Chief Executive will meet and chat with them to engender a feeling of belonging to a big family.

Employees can express their opinions through multiple channels, with the main one being opinion surveys. CFSC issues anonymous "Staff Satisfaction" questionnaires to all employees every year to evaluate their level of satisfaction and expectations. The results are reported to all of them and used as reference for the continuous improvement of staff policies. CFSC also invites leavers to complete questionnaires so as to solicit their suggestions for improvement.

When there is a revision of policies or a new measure, CFSC will consult employees and allow an adaptation period to enhance recognition. The implementation of revised policies or new measures is flexible. Discussions are held with employees in a bid to align with organisational development while having regard to their actual circumstances.

CFSC also cares much about employees' physical and mental health. Activities are held regularly to maintain contact with employees from different service units and positions so as to enhance their sense of belonging. The Staff Association plays an important role in this respect. "It may not be good enough for the Human Resources Department to organise staff activities alone. The Staff Association can complement the role of the Department and motivate more employees to participate." Gloria Chan points out that CFSC has been

promoting work-life balance in recent years. The Staff Association also organises employees to take part in activities such as basketball and football games and running competitions to improve their physical and mental health.

Senior management values the opinions of the Staff Association

Lai Kin-keung is the current Chairman of the Staff Association. His duties include attending board meetings to convey staff opinions to the management. “The Board of Directors values the Staff Association highly. The Board not only gives us many suggestions, but also offers financial support and fully trusts us in relation to our requests and proposed activities.” Chan Kai-ming, Vice Chairman, says, “Joining the Staff Association gives me many opportunities to contact and communicate with colleagues from different departments. I appreciate the close cooperation and mutual trust between the Staff Association and CFSC. This culture of mutual trust was rarely seen in organisations or enterprises I worked in the past.”

At present, the Staff Association’s operation is funded by CFSC every year. All employees automatically become its members without the need to pay membership fee. Committee members can apply for compensation leave for handling the Association’s matters. The Chief Executive also shows his support for the Association by attending its activities in person and posting encouraging comments on the Association’s Facebook fan page. All these are a clear illustration of the harmonious relationship within the organisation.

Tips to Success

- Establish the Staff Association to serve as bridge of communication between the employees and the organisation for conveying policies and opinions. The Staff Association is invited to attend board meetings and its opinions are taken seriously.
- Be open-minded to develop mutual trust with employees. Adopt flexible policies and take into account employees’ needs and development. Nurture a culture of mutual respect to facilitate two-way communication.
- Conduct anonymous annual staff satisfaction surveys among all employees as reference for the continuous improvement of staff policies.
- Treasure communication with new recruits and leavers by inviting them to attend New Staff Orientation and complete exit questionnaires respectively.

Sunta Chemical Has Both the Software and the Hardware to Achieve Barrier-free Communication

In recent years, many enterprises have converted their offices into an open-plan setting to facilitate employees communication and interaction. Last year, chemical materials trader Sunta Chemical Limited renovated its office with an open-plan design to create a home-like environment. Meanwhile, Sunta has adopted barrier-free communication by encouraging about 30 employees in Hong Kong and the Mainland to communicate through an online platform. In addition to face-to-face communication, employees can share their work experience and views on the intranet.

Sunta's Executive Director, Terry Fang, says, "Last year marked the 21st anniversary of the company and we wanted to project a new image in response to market changes. It so happened that the company was planning for renovations and so staff opinions were sought, which made such a unique workplace possible."

Home-like Atmosphere in Office

On entering Sunta's office, colleagues are greeted by a broad hallway where they can replace their shoes with slippers. Further inside there is a free workspace with a green ping-pong table, a comfortable big sofa and upholstered window sills with a sea view. Colleagues can work on their laptops anywhere within this area. The workspace also accommodates an open pantry, massage armchairs, game machines and two "Goodwill Ambassadors" — lovely shiba inu dogs.

Fang believes that employees spend most of their time in the office, so the company hopes it has both the software and the hardware for employers and employees to get along with one other. The hardware refers to the open-plan office with no boundaries which enhances communication between colleagues in different departments. "Except for colleagues in the back office such as the Administration and Finance Departments, other colleagues, including the company's two founders, do not have fixed seats."

The software refers to the updated intranet to encourage colleagues to share and communicate with each other. Aside from the general file storage and news release functions, a "Work Journal" was added to Sunta's intranet in 2014, allowing the colleagues to share work experiences, funny stories and personal feelings while at work.

Establish Online Platform for Two-way Communication

Fang says, "It came to my notice during a business operation that the coordination among different departments was not smooth. I decided to make use of an online platform for employees to share their work situations and feelings." She points

out that the colleagues were consulted on this new measure before its launch and some of them did raise objection at the beginning. “Some employees thought it was meant to keep an eye on them. After communication, all the colleagues recognised that it’s a way to enhance communication. Now the colleagues are willing to share their feelings about their work or life so that they get to know each other better.” She says with a smile that the staunchest opponent at the time is now contributing most of the articles.

Sunta’s employees Alex So and Ken Ngai deem that the online work journal can keep employees informed of the latest news about the company, such as previews and reviews of volunteer activities. As for the newcomers, just a brief surf through the articles will give them a lot of information about the company’s internal operations for them to adapt to the new environment. Project Officer, Stephanie Lui, points out that given the small number of employees in small and medium enterprises, they can outperform the big ones in their teamwork if they can keep an open mind and proactively communicate with their employees.

Tips to Success

- Create an open-plan office to remove boundaries between the colleagues in different departments and enhance mutual communication and exchanges.
- Add an online journal to the company’s intranet to encourage colleagues to share work experiences as well as feelings and make suggestions.
- Consult employees before introducing any new measures or changes. Implement the measures or changes progressively while making necessary adjustments in the process.
- Call on voluntary employees to join for fulfilling corporate social responsibilities, such as organising volunteer teams to regularly participate in different kinds of volunteer work so as to foster team spirit in their spare time.

CATALO Adopts a Proactive Communication Strategy and Enhances Solidarity in an Open Atmosphere

In response to market changes, retail enterprises have to roll out new marketing strategies or adjust internal measures from time to time. However, employees may inevitably be doubtful about the changes, leading to poor adaptation. CATALO Natural Health Foods Limited considers “listening” as the key to workplace communication and uses flexible means to encourage employees to freely express their opinions through various channels.

CATALO hires about 200 employees with more than 60% of them working on the frontline. Canace Lin, Chief Marketing Officer and Executive Director of CATALO, considers that the retail industry is people-oriented, and that a pleasant working life is key to staff commitment to the company. “I believe that the colleagues, regardless of age and post, wish the company would value their opinions. So we adopt a flexible, two-way communication mode allowing them to reflect their opinions to colleagues at different levels and departments through various channels.”

Hold Regular Sharing Sessions and Conduct Consultations Beforehand

She points out that the company shares with employees its latest development direction on a monthly, quarterly and yearly basis so as to enhance their understanding of the company’s products, goals and decisions. Besides, the company shows its care for employees’ feelings and needs by setting up basic exchange platforms such as monthly meetings, quarterly training and annual dinners. Aside from the back office colleagues, the frontline staff will also attend monthly meetings in batches so that all colleagues have the opportunities to participate and to be listened.

Before launching new plans or adjusting measures, the management will conduct consultations to avoid giving employees a negative impression that they are merely notified. Lin explains, “The opinions of employees, especially frontline staff who have contact with customers, can help the company capture market information and craft effective strategies. Only through patient communication that employees’ misunderstanding of the company’s business ideas can be clarified for reaching consensus.”

Break Barriers between Ranks and Departments

She gives the example that after the establishment of a new sales point, the company will pay attention to the work conditions and needs of the employees there. “Some colleagues reported to their superiors that the customer flow in the new store turned out to be higher than expected, leading to a manpower shortage. On learning about this, the company assigned additional employees to assist in

the new store for relieving the colleagues' workload as well as improving sales and service qualities.”

Every year, the management will show up daily at the venue of different scales of trade fairs to meet employees for ice-breaking. Employees will express their opinions more readily after having frequent interactions with the management. Regional Head, Iris, and Retail Manager, Alice, who have participated in different trade fairs, say, “The superiors and the back office colleagues often show up at the scene. They are concerned about the emotions and the needs of the frontline colleagues, giving them a feeling of the company as a big family and encouraging them to work towards the common goals together.”

Lin also mentions that CATALO will launch the Work Improvement Plan in the first quarter of this year. An inter-departmental task force will be established to deal with and follow up on relevant issues. “By past experience, we find that the problems raised by colleagues usually require the coordination of several departments. We hope that with the setting up of the task force, the problems encountered by colleagues at work can be resolved more effectively.”

Tips to Success

- The company regularly shares the updates on its latest development direction with employees so as to enhance their understanding of the company's products, goals and decisions.
- Before launching new strategies or adjusting measures, the management will take the initiative to consult the employees concerned.
- After listening to staff opinions and implementing new measures, the company will carry out a review and make improvements, such as establishing an inter-departmental task force to resolve problems and conflicts.

Acknowledgements :

C&C Joint Printing Co., (H.K.) Limited
CFuCome Limited
Hong Yip Service Company Limited
Christian Family Service Centre
Sunta Chemical Limited
CATALO Natural Health Foods Limited
(Listed in no particular order)

Publisher: Workplace Consultation Promotion Division, Labour Department

Editing and Production: Hong Kong Economic Times

Interview and Writing: Iris Kam Sherry Tin Simon Chu

Editor: Cherry Leung

Design: Eva Mok

Publishing Date: Dec 2018

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Labour Department Homepage: www.labour.gov.hk