



Do you lead a listening organisation?

My company's own advert poses the question, '*Are they hearing what you are saying?*' It asks you to consider whether the messages about your business that you want your audiences – customers, shareholders, employees and communities – to hear are actually the ones they are picking up.

But that question in itself reflects only one side of effective communication. Because another key question that any organisation really needs to be asking itself, is '*Are you hearing what they are saying?*'

In other words, how good a listening organisation are you?

Being a listening organisation strikes me as one of the key challenges facing any business today. At one level it goes to the heart of your employee relations. At another it defines the strength of your customer interface. And at yet another it is crucial to your ability to understand and adapt to the external environment.

For employees, being able to demonstrate that you are listening to them as well as informing them, is crucial if you are trying to build levels of employee engagement. And employee engagement is not some nebulous piece of management jargon. Recent figures show that companies with highly engaged employees deliver annual net income growth 6% above average, those with low levels of engagement deliver 9% below that average.

Think about it another way, if your employees take no pride in working for you are they likely to deliver the quality work that you want?

In developing effective communication with employees it is important to ensure that there are easy ways for employees to tell you things. Sometimes that might be issues that don't figure high on your radar – the state of the staff canteen is a fairly common issue! At other times it might well be good suggestions for improving efficiency that you simply hadn't thought of.

For customers too, there is significant value in continually seeking feedback. This can help with product and service development, making sure that you are

constantly improving and evolving your offering in response to changing markets and customer needs.

You can build opportunities to listen in a variety of ways – they might include regular focus groups with employees or customers or email suggestion schemes. You can use your website to invite feedback or – more expensively - you can commission detailed market research.

Perhaps most effectively you can take the opportunity as a leader of your business to sit down with staff and customers and just listen to what they have to say – try it, you might be surprised at just what you learn and what a good use of your time it is!

Broadly speaking people like to be listened to. But there is another aspect to listening that all companies need to address if they are to engage effectively with their stakeholders – taking action in response to what they hear.

This can be the difficult bit. Not everything you hear from your employees and customers is either desirable, achievable or affordable. For many, the risk that they will hear things they don't like or can't act on often results in a failure to listen. I often find that organisations stop listening and even communicating at all when times get tough - acting on the principle that it is best not upset people – and presumably better to just keep them in the dark.

Again I would argue that it is better to listen and explain the company's position carefully when you can't respond positively than to ignore or hide away from people.

Finally there is another compelling reason why your organisation needs to be good at listening. Listening organisations are much more likely to be externally focused, listening and reacting to what is happening around them – whether that is competitor, market or regulatory activity. And in that sense listening organisations are likely to be more effective learning organisations. And learning organisations – those that are nimble and adaptable and ready to pick up on new ideas - are almost certainly more likely to be successful organisations.

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