

How the industrial journalist can promote good relations

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Abstract

The industrial journalist has a basic responsibility to promote good relationships between employer and employee. Efficient two-way communication through the house journal is of vital interest to the modern company or organisation to ensure mutual understanding, goodwill and appreciation. Managements must inform and motivate their employees at all times, drawing them closer to the heart of the company or organisation through messages conveyed by management supporting their job security, remuneration and recognition and increasing their insight and knowledge of the total work environment. Managements should also be susceptible to their fears or desires in the labour context, allowing the employee to express his views and opinions in a responsible, loyal fashion to his fellow-employees and to management. Silence in the work situation no longer implies consent.

Good relationships between employer and employee in today's labour set-up in South Africa is so important that communication with the workers' corps has become one of the major growth points in the professions of the Public Relations Officer and the Industrial Journalist. Declarations such as "good public relations start within the organisation" and "every employee is an ambassador of the organisation" are being heard more and more nowadays.

A happy and satisfied employee does not only contribute to the positive image of the organisation, but also tempers his demands when it comes to trade union action and collective bargaining. The progressive modern employer realises that good relations with his employees are of cardinal importance for the success of the organisation and the way in which it markets its image, product or service.

The "new employees" of our time

The new employee of our time is no longer a slave of his pay packet and does not any longer dance to the tune of the employer because he is economically dependent upon his monthly pay cheque. The thinking worker will be openly critical, investigative, questioning, outspoken and may even be cynical. He does not accept his position as underling un-

conditionally and rather sees himself as an indispensable part of the organisation on which management is dependent. His realisation of this has naturally improved his bargaining position.

The outmoded view that the employee is a silent partner and a slave in the organisation has also given rise to a poor attitude in the communication with the employee. Internal communication in the organisation was, and in many cases still is, unilateral and is only based on the wishes and motives of management. The employee was told what management, in its wisdom, has decided it should know, but the motivation for certain decision and policy matters was kept hidden because the employee would probably not be able to handle this information. It was also believed that a too intimate knowledge of the organisation's processes would lead to a disadvantage for the organisation, rather than an advantage. This point of view, although not totally without merit, has unfortunately reverted to a situation of excessive secrecy by the employer which led to a poorly informed employee population. Owing to this, poor insight and perspective in the organisation caused damage in both the internal and external environment.

Owing to the poor utilization of scientific communication techniques, employers also seldom knew how to communicate the required message efficiently and simply. The employee, in turn, was not given the opportunity to use the existing staff magazine or other communication channels to communicate with management. The result was that communication with the employee was often narrowed down to an inefficient, uninspiring and high-falutant downwards communication. This resulted in a "don't-care" attitude from the employee corps.

This era is fortunately something of the past. Modernday employers realise that the employee public which exists within the organisation is that organisation's biggest single asset.

Understanding, co-operation and goodwill of the employee mean more to the organisation than that of all its other publics, because such an attitude will invariably have its effects on the external publics as well. In other words, the role of the employee in the public relations of the organisation and recreation of a favourable image is being realised more and more. The negative effects of the dissatisfaction amongst the worker corps and a lack of motivation have been noticed and the effects fully realised by management.

It is clear that today's employee must be fully informed and such information should be conveyed in total honesty and should be supplemented by acts of faith. This would lead to a situation where the employee becomes an ambassador for the organisation.

Honesty and openness regarding the interpretation of decisions and motivations, is an indispensable part of this communication scheme. The employer should not steer away from discussion of its decisions-making

policy or methods and withhold possible controversial matters from its workers. It must be seen as opportunities to establish and enhance trust and loyalty in the organisation and its management. These opportunities may, when not implemented correctly, easily become an embarrassment for management.

The responsible employee may today be more critical and cynical than his predecessor. He is also more willing and keen to promote the organisation and its aims. He is, in fact, worried about the welfare of the organisation because his own future, as well as that of his family, depends upon it. He correctly feels that certain decisions taken by management affect him personally and directly and would like, therefore, to air his views. It is the professional public relations officer and industrial journalist's duty as communication experts to see to it that the information on policy decisions, etcetera, be conveyed correctly and accurately to the employee and to help him interpret his information. The communicators within the organisation must also act as a sounding board to test the attitudes, wishes and fears of the employees and to convey this to management. In other words, an open channel between policy makers and employees should exist.

Internal communication — concept and practice

The person's employment has a direct or indirect role to play in the fulfilment of his needs as described by Maslow and therefore plays a central role in any person's life. It is also a known fact that conditions and frustrations in the work situation reflect themselves in the home of the employee and therefore affect his whole social life. It is, therefore, the employer's duty to create a favourable environment for his employees. The benefits which can be reaped from this is two-fold in that the employer virtually creates for himself a satisfied and productive worker corps which, in turn, leads to higher productivity and increased profits. No organisation can be separated from the community in which it exists. Satisfied and socially stable employees will help to make that community more stable. The employer or the organisation's management therefore reaps further benefits of increased security and goodwill from its community.

The industrial journalist and the staff magazine have an important role to play in the establishment of the secure community through the establishment of a secure and happy workers' corps in the organisation. This can be achieved by various means, but the key to the success can be found in the term communication. Malan and L'Estrage (1977 : 175 176) give a few important hints regarding the close relationship between internal communication and good relations:

Good employee relations do not come about by accident, but by conscious, positive planning to create goodwill, and continuous effort on the part of management to carry out these plans. In the first place, the employer

should appreciate the employee's basic needs of security, opportunity and recognition. Security is perhaps the most important of these, as economic necessity is basic to life . . .

Security means more than better wages. It includes pleasant and healthy working conditions, medical care, pension and bonuses, ordinary and sick-leave . . . in short, the employee needs to be certain that as long as he does his job efficiently, he will be secure in his job.

Man does not live by bread alone, however, and more than economic security is necessary to make a contented employee. Ambition is a basic desire and all men want to know that they have the opportunity of getting ahead in life. They need to be assured that merit will be recognised and that promotion will be fair according to man's ability, efficiency and intelligence.

But a man wants to know even more. He wants the opportunity to give vent to his creative urge; he wants to feel that he is doing something meaningful. He should be told and shown how his contribution, however small, is necessary and important to the overall effort.

At the same time man wants recognition of his work, of his pride and of his dignity as a human being. He wants to be respected and feel accepted as one of the team; he wants consideration and if he can be consulted, so much the better . . . every man needs some sign of appreciation and small things . . . help to build good employee relations. Recognition usually costs management nothing, but it appeals to the employee's pride and makes him a good public relations man.

This quotation shows up a few important areas in which management, and, through management, the public relations officer and industrial journalist, have the opportunity, through internal communication via the staff magazine and other means, to enhance good relations in the organisation.

Assurances of trust, appreciation and recognition and reward for the employee's contribution is of the utmost importance in the internal communication programme and is therefore the work of the industrial journalist.

This, however, is not the only function of an internal communications programme. Internal communications must bind the employees within the organisation. And they must know what management has decided and understand and execute this decision and be motivated by it. Communication such as this requires that management's attitude towards the employee become personal, warm and involved. Trust in the management of the organisation will therefore increase and efficient upward and downward communication will be assured.

Management's understanding of decisions will differ from that of the employee's. This then presupposes a distance between management and employee which could be increased by shortcomings in the communication process. The less the understanding differs, the bigger

the consensus between these groups. The less distance between them, the more efficient the communication within the organisation becomes. Two-way communication in an organisation invariably implies an upward and downward flow of communication. And each of these directions have its own characteristics which help with the efficient flow of communication.

Downward communication

As far as downward communication is concerned, the following characteristics could be identified:

- an awareness and knowledge of the organisation, its aims and viewpoints
- information on developments in these fields
- motivation and loyalty with relation to the organisation and a resultant positive image which helps to ensure a favourable attitude on the part of the public
- satisfaction on the part of the worker about management's actions and decisions and the efficient productive assimilation and execution of this by the workers' corps
- the satisfaction of the employee's desire to be and remain informed and motivated.

This downward flow of communication seems to pose the least problems for the South African industrial journalist. This is still the major activity of the South African industrial journalist, as managements tend to prescribe what will be said and how it will be said in an almost authoritarian way. The reason for this is probably the fact that many of the industrial journalists in this country lack training and basic knowledge, which the journalist in the daily press field need, and management, in an effort to establish communication, then tends to take over the specialist job of being communicator within the organisation.

In organisations where efficient and well-qualified communicators are appointed, there seems to be less of an authoritarian attitude on management's side, and the communicator is recognised for the expert he is. In these situations the reverse flow of communication toward management becomes easier and more efficient.

Upward communication

It is the task of the industrial journalist to ensure an efficient downward flow of communication, but it is also his task to ensure efficient upward flow of communication which stimulates discussion between employer and employee and which provides management with valuable input regarding the attitudes and expectancies and the fears of its employees.

Managements, however, tend to be unwilling to use the staff magazine as a means for the workers' corps to communicate with them. Their

attitude is that the formal channels of communication via the various section and departmental heads do exist and that the information will eventually reach management level. In modern-day society this type of communication does not seem to be efficient, and one could well expect that with these gates and gate-keepers in the way, much of the information from the factory floor will not reach management at all. This then merely serves to emphasize the distance between management and employees.

It is the industrial journalist's duty to try and lessen this distance and to help with more efficient communication in an upward direction.

- This, however, cannot be achieved unless the industrial journalist has the full co-operation of management and that of the employees.
- This also implies a certain responsibility on the part of the industrial journalist and he should act almost as ombudsman within the organisation. Certain complaints and bits of information may be published in the staff magazine for both management and staff to see, but certain pieces of information might be of such a nature that it should be conveyed personally. The employee and management should trust the industrial journalist enough to allow him to communicate in this way.
- This trust can only come about if the industrial journalist can prove his credibility and integrity, which can only be done via his publication.
- This means that the management of the organisation should allow the industrial journalist as much freedom as possible to write about and move as freely as possible within the organisation.
- This, of course, presupposes that the industrial journalist will show the responsibility to use this freedom to the advantage of the organisation and prove his loyalty by selecting the news for the publication in such a manner that neither management nor the workers' corps will be harmed or embarrassed by the publication.

This call for a greater "press freedom" within the organisation has been made repeatedly within the past year by persons such as Prof. Nick Wiehahn and Professors Les Switzer and Gavin Stewart. The South African Association of Industrial Editors fully subscribe to the view that the industrial journalist should obtain a greater freedom, but we also realise that this cannot be given unless the industrial journalists in this country can prove that they are qualified to take the responsibility of this increased freedom. This qualification really only comes with training and practical work within either the commercial press or with certain selected house-journals. Only after mastering the principles of good journalism, that is, responsible reporting and commentary, will the industrial journalist in South Africa be able to demand the right to operate within an environment of freedom within the limits of responsibility and loyalty to the organisation. Only then will the industrial

journalist be accepted as a communicator in his own right and his opinion be valued when it comes to the planning of a communication programme.

Until such a time it is unfortunately so that communication within organisations tend to be directed only downwards from management level. Workers do not seem to have a voice and a channel through which to communicate with management. We believe that this lack of informal communication channels may give rise to serious labour problems in South Africa and could cost the country millions of Rands. It is up to management to see and realise this and up to the industrial journalist to accept the challenge of this type of communication in order to safeguard his organisation and the country.

Summary

The role of the industrial journalist in promoting good relationships between management and the workers' corps in any organisation cannot be emphasized too much. This is an important role which does, however, require certain actions from both management and from the industrial journalist. Management must trust the industrial journalist and grant him the freedom he needs to operate efficiently within the organisation. The industrial journalist must accept his freedom with responsibility and loyalty towards the organisation.

Only when this communication channel has been established, can an effective two-way communication system exist within the organisation. This informal channel helps to alleviate labour problems which could cost the country millions of Rands and could, in fact, endanger the security of this country.

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