Making communication SOAR: your communication plan

As leaders and managers, we all know that good communication is essential in any early years organisation. We actively seek staff that demonstrate good communication skills in the certain knowledge that they are more likely to be effective in their role and more able to develop positive relationships with children, parents and colleagues.

What is communication?

‘The imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing or using some other medium’

‘The successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings’

Oxford English dictionary

Communication is often highlighted as one of the greatest challenges for managers and one that, if not constantly worked at, can create a negative workplace culture. Indeed, recent research from Investors in People highlighted a negative workplace culture as the major reason for people leaving, with low job satisfaction and feeling undervalued by leadership teams cited as the two highest factors.

Certainly, within seconds of arriving at a nursery, whether on a visit or to work, I am acutely aware of the ‘internal vibes’ - simply by observing how people behave and act. This, combined with the values and philosophy that guide it, are all indicators of the organisation’s culture.

Really effective communication is what makes a nursery business stand out, says Linda Baston-Pitt. She shares with readers her communication planning.

“The art of communication is the language of leadership.”

James Humes

The link between high-quality provision and positive leadership is irrefutable, for the leader heavily influences communication and plays a vital role in creating and maintaining the organisation’s desired culture and climate. And it’s the culture of the workplace that provides the medium in which people are able to grow.

But, without a vision, even the best organisations can get lost. For managers and directors like us, the point of leadership is to give the team a clear, articulated vision and to create a culture that most people want to work in.

If what you’re saying isn’t authentic or believable, then it’s worthless. But if it’s backed up by goals and actions that push everything in the direction of the organisation’s purpose, then it’s motivating. In any organisation, what you do will always be more important than what you say.

The challenge

In my experience of visiting many early years organisations, what defines the best - and makes them stand out - is that they are constantly working at improving their communication. They are innovative in their approach, always searching for creative ways of articulating their organisation’s vision and values in the simplest way possible.

It is widely recognised that, in today’s increasingly complex communication environment, the competition to attract and retain not only parents but also good staff is fierce. And that is why a sound internal communication plan can be the make or break of many nurseries. We must never lose sight of the fact that our organisation is only as good as its reputation. So, effective communication is vital to our success.

Over the last five years, as the Old School House (OSH), like many nurseries, has expanded, so has the challenge to ensure that all stakeholders receive, understand and act on the flow and exchange of information that constantly

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circulates. But we also need to recognise that information overload is just as crippling as not enough information.

**The solution**

At the OSH, our goal has been to develop a seamless internal communication plan that encourages unity of purpose, and gives the staff team a feeling of inclusion, belonging and shared ownership.

Developing an internal communication plan takes time, and we’ve been refining our approach over the last five years. One of our core ways towards achieving this has been to create a strengths-based and -led organisation, underpinned by a positive leadership model.

Four strategies – developing an enabling positive climate, positive relationships, communication and meaning – have helped us to create a compelling message that makes sense to both staff and parents.

The next step, building on what already works well for us, was to re-evaluate our communication plan by looking at it through a new lens to ensure that it meets the changing needs of our business. We did this by involving the whole team in an internal communication audit – a very apt word, as ‘audit’ comes from the Latin to hear.

With our end goal in mind and in order to gain a complete picture, we decided to use two methods:

- a whole-team SOAR analysis activity (defining strengths, opportunities, aspiration and results)
- staff focus groups to provide feedback.

Our SOAR analysis focused on four key questions:

1. what are our greatest communication strengths?
2. how do we play to our strengths through effective communication?
3. what is our preferred future and vision?
4. what are the measurable results that will tell us we’ve achieved that vision?

Traditionally, the senior management team would dictate the direction and define the communication plan, whereas adopting an appreciative-inquiry approach means involving the whole organisation - fully engaging everyone at all levels. All our staff were involved in this conversation and, in doing so, actively influenced our future direction.

First, the SOAR model helped us all not only to inform the direction of the OSH, but also to identify each room and department’s strengths. At the next stage, our use of focus groups proved to be a fantastic way of drilling down into key areas that emerged from the SOAR analysis, as it was direct insights from the team that helped us to get to the root of why communication does or doesn’t flow effectively in nursery.

**The impact**

In conclusion, investing time in creating and developing a communication strategy that involves the whole team has been invaluable. Listening to the excited, thoughtful conversations between individuals and groups has been heart-warming, and I’ve been overwhelmed by the creative solutions that the team have come up with.

Apart from that, the mutual respect and understanding that characterises the whole team has been strengthened, and, as a result, the team have more respect for their customers - the parents - and the work they do.

Responding to the feedback from our communication audit, we have since implemented a number of new initiatives that support the goals of our communication plan with the result that they are now embedded in our practice.

One of the most successful has been our adoption of six-week sprints (a highly effective way of prioritising and time limiting discussion of initiatives) and daily stand-up scrum meetings or time-limited progress discussions (see http://scrummethodology.com/scrum-meetings/), which are routinely used in the tech industry.

Our adapted versions of these have helped to boost collaboration and internal communication between team members across the organisation. No one is left out of the chain of thought, and all team members are able to contribute to the process. As an anonymous sage said: “The basic building block of good communications is the feeling that every human being is unique and of value.”

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