



Avoid Headaches: Engage Your Employees



It's as simple as asking three questions — and listening for answers

By Summer Spencer

Members of your team — your colleagues and co-workers — are the most important asset you have. It's only with their help that your organization can achieve success and exceed its goals.

While your staff members can be your biggest asset, however, they can also be your biggest headache! You can avoid these pains by establishing a solid working relationship early on and then building on that foundation.

The Most Important Truth

It's intrinsic: Your employees must feel valued. This doesn't mean you need to throw money at them (although we all know they would certainly appreciate that!) In these economic times, organizations are cutting back on the lunch treats,

Build Staff Capacity

For more on energizing your staff, see these *Nonprofit World* articles (available at www.snpo.org/members):

- **Overcome Organizational Indifference** (Vol. 24, No. 2)
- **Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change** (Vol. 13, No. 3)
- **Regular People, Spectacular Results** (Vol. 23, No. 4)
- **Use Employee Ownership to Motivate People & Gain Revenue** (Vol. 22, No. 4)
- **The Organizational Personality and Employee Performance** (Vol. 21, No. 1)

monthly birthday celebrations, and bonuses. However, there is something you *can* do: Ask three simple questions.

Ask, and Listen

Begin by bringing your employees together and telling them you want their input. Challenge them to ensure that the conversation doesn't turn into a "venting session," and ask them for positive, thoughtful suggestions. Emphasize that the organization can strengthen and grow only with their thoughts and ideas.

Then, move them into smaller groups, and have each group assign its own facilitator and reporter. Ask them to answer these three questions in 30 minutes:

1. What things does this organization do well?
2. If you were a manager, what things would you change immediately?
3. What are the "water cooler conversations" that top managers need to be aware of but no one usually shares with them?

After 30 minutes, ask each group to report its answers to the full group (keeping the names of individual responders anonymous). Regardless of what you think of their suggestions, stay positive. Remain engaged by asking questions and having them elaborate on their ideas.

Follow through on Suggestions

After the listening session, summarize the responses, and e-mail them to employees. If you really want to drive home the openness of your communications, consider posting the ideas in the employee break room.

If some of the suggestions include low hanging fruit, make changes immediately and share them with your employees. For instance, one group I facilitated recommended ice trays in the freezer, and we acted on that idea overnight.

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If you can't make the suggested changes, explain why. If you plan to make them in the future, share the timeline, if only loosely. Communicate with employees on a monthly basis about the actions that have been taken, the future plans, ideas about how staff can help, and explanations about what hasn't or can't be done.

The more you share with your employees, the more they'll appreciate the organization and its leadership. A valued employee is a happy employee. Happy employees help move your organization one step closer to its mission. ■

Articles in this department are written by the staff and members of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (www.allianceonline.org).

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