

The power of connection



American workers have lost the sense of security and identification with the company that gave meaning to their work lives. Now they are searching for a connection, a commitment to something larger to replace that lost dependence on the corporation.

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I WOULD like to share a personal experience. One day, my secretary noticed an advertisement – ‘Executive Secretary wanted for a large multinational company’ – in a local newspaper that precisely described her current position. Feeling a bit curious and more than a bit anxious, she confronted me about the ad. I confirmed her fear that the company was trying to replace her. So, how did my secretary respond? She took out her own advertisement in the same newspaper and in it proclaimed: ‘I Quit’.

When asked about her action, I had the audacity to say, “Doesn’t she have the courage to tell me she’s quitting?” This incident was a lesson for me – that courage should stem from the boss and not his secretary. Now mull over the following:

- Would you say that I was connected to this employee?
- Would you describe the internal relationships of the company as being built on common respect and courtesy?
- Do you think I understood or cared about the needs of the secretary?
- Would the remaining employees feel highly committed to the company after such an incident?
- Can an employee ever fall in love with a company such as this?
- And ask yourself, ‘Can this happen in my company?’

At one time or another, we have all felt disconnected within our own department,

across other departments in the company or across group companies. Disconnection hurts. It tears the heart and dampens the spirit. It creates a sense of isolation. Disconnected employees feel left out of the information loop that is so critical in building effective relationships. As a result, employee commitment to the company decreases, cynicism and distrust rise and productivity comes to a grinding halt.

Think about the times you felt really connected to the organisation. Remember how enthusiastic you were about being a member of the group? You felt you were an important part of the team. You jumped into major projects to which you freely contributed your time, effort and ideas. Even in tough and stressed times the sense of connection helped you re-dedicate yourself to the company’s goals. You were at your best because you felt connected.

How do you know when you or your organisation is connecting with your employees? There are some obvious signs: Employees feel free to speak up. They know that their opinions matter and will get a fair hearing. They are confident that they will receive timely information on matters that affect both the particular area/department and the company at large. Connection results in employee commitment and not just compliance. Employees who do not feel connected seldom offer the extra energy and creative inputs or take risks that are so essential to success in today’s competitive marketplace.

You are connecting when you understand the needs of your employees. Mutual understanding between employees and the company is the only way to attain the goals of high quality, efficient productivity, great service and fair profit. After all, it is the employee who is responsible for achieving these.



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Hi-tech and high touch

Traditional barriers to effective organisational connection are becoming obsolete, not because of some grand corporate renaissance but through absolute competitive necessity. Hierarchy is shrinking and the size of operations is decreasing into small strategic business units, theoretically making it easier to build connections with all employees. But then, why isn't there a feeling of connection despite the above measures?

Technological developments such as the Internet, e-mail, e-commerce and other communication systems are powerful instruments in building connections between employees and the companies they work for. Such systems remove traditional communication barriers between people of different status, hierarchies and locations. There are neither status barriers nor location barriers to sending or receiving electronic messages.

Yet, even these revolutionary tools that offer seemingly limitless communication options do leave a void that eats into the very soul of the organisation. Somehow, there is a missing link.

Walk into any workplace in the US, be it a doctor's office, supervisor's cubicle, gas station, garage or a government office, and you will see the human touch. It may be something as simple as a family picture, a drawing by an employee's child, special handwritten notes from a spouse or autographs from close friends. It may be something as formal as a framed citation letter or as exhilarating as the personal autograph of a celebrity. Such powerful icons represent the need for the human touch, for human connection at the workplace. No sophisticated electronic gadget can ever replace the value of the human touch.

Organisations today invest huge amounts of time and energy to better understand the thinking, values and behaviour patterns of customers. What even the most

well-intentioned customer-friendly companies overlook, however, is that the very same processes can easily be used to learn more about their own employees.

Few organisations give anything more than token consideration for the views of employees. Beyond an occasional meeting or employee survey, most CEOs overlook opportunities available to listen and learn from the people who perform the lion's share of the real work – the frontline employees. Think about the time you were a frontline employee, how often did your supervisor or boss actively solicit and listen to your views?

Internal listening builds connections between frontline employees and the company. When employees understand that their opinion matters just as much as those of the customer, their commitment rises. Winston Churchill once said that courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen calmly to your employees.

Senior executives often believe that as soon as their latest memo hits the mail room, their work is done! They simply send out copies to everyone they can think of, including the CEO, and it's done. Better yet, e-mail it and save postage. Many managers even have certificates from business-writing workshops to prove they can write powerful memos.

To connect with today's employees, we must intelligently employ many of the available effective techniques. Small-group and large-group communication meetings, focus groups and work groups, video tapes and audio tapes, e-mail and snail mail, television and computer screens, newsletters and form letters, bulletin boards and white boards, open forums and closed forums, video conferencing and multi-media are all effective tools.

The key to effectively using these channels is to keep messages simple. President

Roosevelt said effective communication can be learned as 'KISS: keep it short and simple'.

Two-way interaction

We have all heard about or experienced what management expert Ken Blanchard calls the 'Seagull Manager' who seldom interacts with his people, but occasionally swoops down into the workplace, dumps work on everybody and quickly flies away. There is no desire on the part of the Seagull Manager to interact with employees or hear about what is really happening at the workplace.

Connection can occur only in an environment that promotes active two-way interaction among all employees. A great challenge facing most companies lies in transforming the traditional one-way, top-down communication process into a flexible two-way communication loop. Old habits die hard. For years, we have recruited and trained gate keepers, men and women with the express duty of keeping other people away from us.

We must come down from behind our desk and embrace an in-your-face passion for employee interaction, which is easier to adopt than one might think. Stop writing memos and, instead, walk down to the hall in the corporate office or walk into the factory and talk directly to the people you were going to write to and let them see you in action. Give them a chance to get back in your face. Do not just ask for two-way interaction, demand it assertively. Make the connections memorable enough. If people are reluctant, that's okay, but keep at it as perseverance pays. Demonstrate your commitment to make the connection.

Feedback in real time

Picture yourself on an operating table. Midway through the operation, the surgeon notices that the assistant is performing improperly. Would you prefer the surgeon to

make a mental note of the oversight and discuss it at the assistant's annual performance appraisal six months later or take immediate, real-time corrective action during the surgery? Let's be a little less dramatic. I am a big fan of our cricket team. Just imagine our captain, Saurav Ganguly, telling his players on the first day of the recent test series, "It is going to be a long, tough year but work hard and, at the end of the year, we will know how well you have performed." Far-fetched, I admit, but the very outrageousness of the two examples illustrates the essential need to give people immediate feedback.

When employees are not given feedback in real-time, they tend to fill in the gaps with worst-case scenarios. For example, what goes through your mind when your daughter is two hours late coming home from a date? Do you imagine her safe and sound, laughing and enjoying the company of good friends while the time innocently passes by (which is probably what is happening) or do you, like the vast majority of parents, begin envisioning catastrophes? Car broke down, they have been arrested or, worse yet, they have met with an accident and are being rushed to the emergency room of a hospital? We all tend to fill in what is unknown with these negative, worst-case scenarios.

Rumours are probably the most common result of withholding real-time feedback. Where do you think the rumours most come from? Rumours begin when employees start filling in the gaps of an incomplete picture in the absence of real-time feedback.

Immediate feedback helps ease the strains produced by rumours. By not delaying information, by quickly closing the communication loop through sincere, genuine feedback in real-time, managers can build strong connections in their organisation. ■

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A challenge facing most companies is to create flexible two-way communication systems.