

Good morning, everybody. Dennis Engelbrecht with The Family Business Institute.

I was reading an article yesterday about two-way communication, which I thought was funny because if it's not two-way, is it communication at all? I mean, after all, don't you... Otherwise, it's just talking. But I was also thinking for our construction leaders, I think in the realm of construction, two-way communication's a real challenge. In my experience, I've seen a lot of people talking at people and a lot of talking, not a lot of listening, and oftentimes not a lot of two-way communication.

And a lot of our construction leaders, even some of the successful ones, are not great two-way communicators. So, it occurred to me that maybe the simplest road to better leadership, better employee engagement and better performance for many companies is really just improving your two-way communication. So, I say if it's not two-way, is it even communication? Well, it really isn't because when you have one-way communication, you don't know if the message has been heard, if the message has been understood, and if the message has been bought into, you only know those things if you solicit feedback or you get feedback unsolicited either way, I guess.

Well, I think people think sometimes that one-way communication is faster and simpler, right? Just tell them what to do so they can go do it. But I don't think that it really is faster and simpler that is. I think when it's one way and I'm thinking of a route in the field, and we got a job to do out here and I'm just telling everybody what to do and then go out and do it. But what we find then maybe after time is you're walking around, and people are asking stupid questions because they didn't understand what they were supposed to do. Or you find you're fixing mistakes caused by a misunderstanding or perhaps even a lack of care in what they're doing, which is a problem sometimes when it's one-way communication, it's often telling them the what but not the how.

And sometimes it's telling them the how, but not the why. And if you just send people out to go do stuff without the how and without the why, you're likely to get questions and mistakes and it's probably going to take longer than if we had all that conversation upfront. So how do you assure that you have two-way communication being done by your frontline managers, your other managers in the company? Well, first of all, I think communication is something to talk about. It's an element to talk about with your leaders and managers in your meetings, in your training. It's also something to make sure that you're demonstrating yourself as a higher-level leader and you're demonstrating as a company. This article had several ideas for a company getting better at two-way communication suggested four things. Number one, ask me anything sessions. Basically, scheduling a time, whether it's like a town hall where people can ask questions, put questions out in advance, or you may even suggest some topics that people can ask questions about.

Another thing they suggested is coffee chats. Similar to the ask me anything sessions, but really just engaging with a few employees, maybe in one department or another, or maybe at the lunch table itself or the coffee, the morning breakfast table in the lunchroom. But these informal chats where you really engage people and learn more about them. The third idea was soliciting feedback, both formal and informal, maybe around a particular topic problem or opportunity. And then similar to that, holding engagement sessions where you take your department or whatever, or a department and you say, "Here's the issue. What would you suggest or how would you approach this issue or this problem?" And getting your people involved in the creation of strategy, in the solving of problems in maybe a formal setting.

So those are just four ideas for a company. Now, on a personal level, as a leader, there are many things you can do, but basically it just involves on a daily basis, asking employees questions. Could be asking your direct folks at you're directly in charge of on a daily or weekly basis, what is your focus for the week? What are your priorities? Do you need any help? Do you need any resources that you're having trouble getting or to accomplish what you need to accomplish? Are you stuck on anything? Anything causing you a problem that I could help you resolve or give you advice on? What is the best and worst part of your job? What's bothering you about the company? What's great about the company?

If you could wave a magic wand, what one thing about the company or your job would you want to change or make different? So just on a personal level, going around and asking those folks those questions engages them and you start to get feedback and you start to have lots of two-way conversations. Employee reviews are obviously an opportunity where two-way feedback is very important. And to think about those, we call them reviews. Well, reviews have a one-way sort of connotation to it. I'm going to tell you what you're doing, what you're doing wrong, and what you need to do differently. Well, how about finding out what they're having issues with, how they'd like to see their job change, how they think they could improve, where they want to go with their life, and how do you think you can get there? What do you need in terms of training, resources, support to get the most out of you to be the best you can be for our company?

So that's a little bit different approach, if you will, to employee reviews, but make sure those are two, two-way feedback sessions. Finally, I think the nirvana is to have a culture of dialogue where there's dialogue going on in all aspects of the company and good two-way communication being practiced by all your leaders, all your managers and people. Feeling free to give that feedback. So, one of the ways to get that, and one of the characteristics that comes along with that is employees need to see tangible outcomes that result from their contributions. So, if you as a leader share actions that you've taken based on employee initiative or employee input, that signals that those contributions are valued.

But it also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. So, it's really people being fully engaged. And when you have that culture of dialogue, I think your engagement scores will go up, your retention percentages go up, and even the extent to which your culture and organization attract new good people will increase. So, look around, think about the two-way communication that's hopefully going on in your company and where it might not be very effective, and see if you can make that a mantra or a consistent thing within your company to have great two-way communication.

Dennis Engelbrecht, Family Business Institute.