

Making sure staff get the company message

WHEN Peter Murtagh agreed to appear on BBC's Back to the Floor television series this month he could not have realised how bad his firm's internal communications would be made to look. Murtagh, who runs Hoover's Cambuslang factory in Scotland, did a stint on the shopfloor to see how the business might be improved.

There were problems with forklift trucks getting parts from the store, where layout was poor and the lighting bad. Assembly areas needed improvement. Women on the assembly line, who appeared as savvy as any of the management, were being made redundant because, as temporary workers, it was cheaper to get rid of them than full-time employees.

It was an eye-opener for Murtagh. When he was asked about internal

There is more to communication than putting up a notice board. Roger Eglin reports on how to engage the workers.

communications, he explained that there was a notice board and monthly meetings. But it was clear that any communication that did exist was strictly topdown. Shopfloor workers had become fed up with trying to draw management's attention to defects and being ignored.

There was anxiety that Cambuslang might lose out if work was transferred to a Hoover factory

in Lisbon. Only late in the day did Murtagh begin to explain the realities of this contest to staff and seek their support.

The story had a happy ending. Cambuslang beat Lisbon for the work and Murtagh was able to keep the women workers on the payroll.

However, the Hoover management had made no serious attempt to enlist the support of their obviously willing but frustrated workers.

This is almost a textbook study in how not to do it. But, sadly, this state of affairs is fairly common in industry. Bill Quirke, an expert on company internal communications, says he has come across many cases of failed communications.

Quirke, who runs a consultancy, Synopsis, has produced help in the form of a report, called Communicating Successfully in Uncertainty.

He says many companies rely on a "loud-hailer" approach, issuing workers with directives that often have little impact. "Most organisations are keen to get good communications together but half the time people don't appreciate what the message is. The organisation needs a clear agenda and individuals need a clear sense of direction."

Attempts to change a company often fail because workers have not been told what the policy is and how it will affect them.

"Success depends on a new style of internal communication that is less about telling the troops and



Communications convert: Morley Fund Management's Jane Tebbey

more about engaging and directing people," says Quirke. "If people understand the bigger organisational picture they will be more willing to stay for the ride and more motivated to do the job you need them to do."

This is the sort of challenge that CGNU, the insurance giant, faced two years ago after the merger of CGU and Norwich Union. The board wanted to draw the two groups' asset-management businesses together into a world-class fund-management firm.

But as well as the challenge of enlisting staff support, CGNU faced the post-merger task of bringing together staff from different business cultures at Morley Fund Management. "The priority was to get Morley functioning as one organisation with a clear vision," says Jane Tebbey, head of internal communications.

Jan Nuttall, human-resources director at Morley, says: "Driving change increased pressure on our people at a time when they were struggling to bring teams together and maintain 'business as usual' for clients".

Synopsis advised on a communications strategy that had three parts:

- Making sure the business was communicating clear messages and setting out "the big picture" for staff;
- Establishing channels to promote two-way dialogue;
- Giving managers the skills to make them effective translators of business messages for their teams.

The process started in January with a two-day workshop for senior management followed by a conference for all staff, now almost 1,000 strong and growing. Feedback was positive, with 95% of those who attended saying that they now understood Morley's business imperatives better.

The conference was followed by the launch of a two-way communication process, Business Update, to give staff regular briefings on business plans and the opportunity to discuss their part in achieving Morley's aims.

Morley's management found one problem — the risk of swamping staff with too many messages (see panel on left), so Tebbey says they now focus on three or four key messages.

Managers are crucial to the success of the communications policy and 200 of them continue to be trained on how to maintain a dialogue with their staff. Checks are made on the scheme's effectiveness and regular changes made.

Tebbey says: "We have set challenging goals for the business and the only way to achieve them is to make sure everyone knows what they are doing."

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THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO DO IT

ONE of the most common failings in company communications is to swamp staff with too many messages. "They haven't the brain space to take them all in," says Bill Quirke of Synopsis, a consultancy.

□ **Firms should introduce the equivalent of air-traffic control to gather and prioritise messages in organised streams.**

□ **When Abbey National's retail bank wanted to improve internal communications, a team was created to develop a communications calendar and organise the flow of messages. Abbey says: "It helped us streamline our information and control the volume. Now people are more receptive to the messages we put out."**

□ **At the very least, a communications-traffic control team will stop the sort of gaffe made by one company. It sent managers redundancy notices and details of new company cars on the same day.**