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KELLER'S COMMENTS

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Communication Is Key to Enhancing Staff Performance and Retention Now

Communication is even more important in times of transition, and the recovery is no exception to this rule for CPA firms, and for

any other employer. Sharing information—and a lot of it—can be very helpful, asserted author Quint Studer. He advocates what he calls a “culture of transparency” to enhance communication.

“Leaders have talked about transparency for a long time, but it’s never been more important than it is now,” says Studer, author of the new book *Straight A Leadership: Alignment, Action, Accountability*.

“Remember, we share information with employees for a couple of reasons: one, it’s the right thing to do, and two, it’s good for business. And most companies can use every possible edge these days.”

Enhance openness with staff at your CPA firm with these suggestions from Studer:

- **People assume the worst when they don’t hear from leaders.** Silence from the partners causes a lot of fear and resentment, which certainly doesn’t contribute to a productive culture.

“Maybe the news is bad, but maybe it’s not as bad as they are imagining,” said Studer. “And even if it is, once they know the truth they can plan and act accordingly.”

- **Transparency helps staff connect to the why.** When staff are working in a vacuum, they can’t see the financial “big picture,” and decisions the owners make may seem ill-advised or unfair or simply inexplicable. Transparency connects them to the why—and that understanding propels them to act.

- **Staff may not understand how the external environment affects the firm.** Owners are aware of innovations reshaping the marketplace, financial pressures facing clients, and so forth, Studer said. Lower-level staff don’t necessarily see the same picture.

- **Transparency allows for consistent messaging across the firm.** What you say—rather than the grapevine—is what will be heard when you provide more information. Studer said it’s a good idea to train partners and managers in “key words” they can use to ensure all staff in all departments are hearing the same messages positioned in the same way.

- **The above creates organizational consistency.** “When everyone is hearing the same messages from their leaders, everyone is motivated to respond in similar ways.”

“Consistent companies tend to be healthy, stable companies,” noted Studer. “And transparency and consistency are two sides of the same coin.”

Questioning Techniques to Get the Best Staff Feedback

Asking what staff are thinking is a great way to understand their concerns, so you can find out where more information is needed, or about other problems or issues that could bring about employee dissatisfaction.

How you ask may be as important as what you ask, asserted Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ, a leadership development and employee survey firm.

In "Never Ask These Engagement Survey Questions," Murphy explained that you should take care in crafting the questions you ask.

"If you don't know exactly what actions will fix a situation, don't ask a question about it until you do," he said. "Otherwise, you're setting the stage for employees to doubt your leadership capabilities.

"Every survey question you ask implies a promise that you're going to take action based on the answer you get," Murphy added. "And if you break that promise, things will get ugly."

Common survey queries such as these are some of the "worst offenders" of this rule, Murphy said:

- I have a great friend at work.
- I like my boss.
- My boss cares about me as a person.
- I trust my boss.

How would you fix a low score in response to these? Instead of vague questions like the ones above, Murphy suggested asking a question such as this: "If I shared my work problems with my direct boss, I know that he/she would respond constructively."

"Now that's a question that can be easily worked on," Murphy pointed out.

Additional questions that will also bring information that can lead to concrete solutions:

- Constructive feedback from my manager has helped me to improve my performance.
- I can bring concerns about quality, service, or safety to my manager and not worry about causing problems for myself.
- I will have to learn new skills to achieve my assigned goals for this year.
- This organization shares its success stories with its employees.
- If I shared my work problems with my manager, I know that he/she would respond constructively.

● **Transparency leads to faster, more efficient execution.** "When times are tough, execution is *everything*," Studer said. "And the ticket to good execution is good alignment: All sectors of an organization must understand exactly what's required so they act in a coordinated and collaborative fashion. Transparency is what facilitates that kind of alignment."

● **Transparency heals we/they divisive-ness.** Studer often warns clients about the *we/they phenomenon*—the perception that there are separate groups inside a firm that work at cross-purposes. It might manifest as staff vs. management, or this branch vs. that branch, or corporate vs. everyone else. "In transparent organizations that share common agendas, it's hard for we/they to flourish," says Studer.

● **Transparency keeps good people from leaving.** High performers don't thrive in an atmosphere of secrecy and uncertainty. They want to work for a firm that treats them with respect and values their problem-solving skills. "Hold critical information too close to the vest and they may assume the company isn't healthy—and because they often have options in even the worst economy, they may leave for greener pastures."

"Obviously, your hardworking innovators are the very people you want to hold on to in times like these," Studer said. "Make sure your culture nurtures them."

Asking directly what staff like and don't like may be the best way to learn where your firm can best expand communication efforts, as well as training and other retention initiatives. The accompanying sidebar provides some dos and don'ts on asking for information from your staffs. □

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