Recommendations: Departmental Communication

Nearly every shelter (and other organizations, too) can improve its communication. Communication issues can occur throughout the organization, from top-down (communication from those in charge or "at the top" to those in general staff positions) to bottom-up (communication from subordinates and general staff employees up to supervisors and leadership), and horizontally (communication across departments or among employees and leaders working at the same levels within an organization). If you're looking to improve within-department organizational communication, try these best practices:

Best Practices

1) **Form a Communication Committee**

   "Step Zero" should always be to form a committee including employees from all affected or "problem areas" of the organization. Your own employees can identify and generate solutions for communication issues within departments. Task the committee with coming up with 5-10 ideas to address communication issues. Forming a committee has the added benefit of providing a neutral venue to work out communication issues. Celebrate your employees and show thanks. Consider providing lunch during committee meetings. It is important to value committee member contributions and to reinforce to your employees that their effective coordination is associated with the shelter's ongoing successes.

   The committee should be tasked with identifying strategies for improvement in form, frequency, function, and focus of communication. Don't be afraid to act as an arbitrator between employees. Avoid the "blame game"—if discussions get heated or accusatory, impose a five-minute cool-down break. If communication is the issue, misunderstanding is likely the culprit, so allowing employees a moment to clear their heads and approach the problem with a fresh start may generate better outcomes. Resolving communication issues may require patience—a single committee meeting is unlikely to solve all problems.

2) **Rethink Brainstorming**

   Consider asking employees to list their ideas in written form, so that everyone's ideas are considered. Again, discourage "naming and shaming" or other forms of accusation—ideas should be constructive. The committee should be about solving problems, not punishing employees for trying to fix communication problems. Try to implement as many ideas as possible. Make it clear what

changes can be made immediately versus those that will need to wait and those that are not feasible to change (be sure to explain WHY these changes cannot be made or cannot be instituted immediately).

3) Institute a Culture of Transparency

Work toward instituting a culture of "transparency"—employees should be encouraged to be open, honest, clear, and direct about what they are saying and doing, and why they are saying and doing it Improve departmental communication with team-building exercises. Practicing role-taking, in which affected persons place themselves in the shoes of the other affected party, can get employees to think about why others are misunderstanding or communicating less than optimally. Present employees with sample communication problems and have them work in groups to come up with solutions and recommendations for improvements. Alternatively, set up scenarios as role-plays, and have employees act out poor communication and ideal communication strategies.

4) Leverage Meetings

Employees may view meetings as the primary means for organizational communication. Use this to your advantage by encouraging mutual communication and participation between employees with communication issues during meetings. Consider setting aside time to highlight successful communication moments from the previous week, month, etc. rather than focusing only on the problem areas.

5) Assign Mentors and Invest in Training Workshops

Managers often set the tone for appropriate behavior in an organization, so observe how managers communicate with one another and to their employees. If their communication skills need improvement, consider assigning an experienced mentor/advisor to guide them in their communication. Invest in leadership training workshops (such as those offered as part of continuing education programs by universities).

6) Identify Growth Areas

Examine how employees are communicating (or not communicating, as the case may be) and identify areas for improvement. Lapses in communication may result from opposing shifts, so encourage asynchronous "*two-way*" communication strategies that allow for back-and-forth responses (like email exchanges) rather than "*one-way*" communication strategies like leaving a note

for incoming staff in such cases. Even employees who work closely together may fall into communication routines in which assumptions take the place of genuine communication—managers should not expect their subordinates to read their minds, and employees shouldn't expect their co-workers to read their minds either. Remind employees to speak up rather than assume until regular communication becomes a good habit again. If employees are having repeated communication disputes, then a manager or neutral individual with strong communication skills should step in and arbitrate. Identify growth areas in communication among individual employees and consider sending them to leadership or communication workshops (universities often offer such workshops as part of continuing education programs). Be careful not to single out employees—instead try to include groups of employees who could benefit from communication skills training.

Conclusion & Additional Resources

Improving departmental communication in shelters can help employees feel heard and enable them to perform their jobs well. Try out some of these tips to help improve departmental communication at your shelter. For more tips, look into the following resources:

- *Managing Organizational Communication:* https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/managingorganizationalcommunication.aspx
- *Listening to your Employees:* https://blog.shrm.org/blog/5-reasons-why-you-should-listen-to-your-employees?fbclid=IwAR0_KBEzjVo-RFbh4_tDqj0tStIXviuP1n7cHHxrsscpBaFlvIhUgxX4gjA
- *3 Steps to Better Communication:* https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/organizational-and-employee-development/pages/3-steps-to-better-communication.aspx?fbclid=IwAR3z4q_NTXddVwLdrum5PX4CoK5knJuO-bW532vGb69oEXzOmEe044A_CYY
- *4 Ways to Facilitate Effective Communication in the Workplace:* https://www.adp.com/spark/articles/2018/11/4-ways-to-facilitate-effective-communication-in-the-workplace.aspx?fbclid=IwAR2DmIIwT4wlA5F6Kmp1oxj4_pjY_J4CO2VwjwzDnm1Kk8ZrSlfeXNZ2AXo