

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION FOR IMPROVING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN KNOWLEDGE BASED INDUSTRIES

Pratima Mutyala

Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. Email: pratima.vishnu@gmail.com

Abstract: Human Resource Management in the age of internet and superfast mobile communication is battling new questions on its role, scope and relevance to corporate management. Many doubt whether a modern knowledge industry with every bit of information on its fingertips even requires an HR Department. This is because many of the traditional roles of HRM like recruitment, designing job profile, interviewing of candidates etc. are now easily outsourced or accomplished by computers and smartphones. So what is it that makes an internal HR department valuable for a company? It is the alignment with the company's mission, vision, and the management of its relationship with employees who are its greatest assets.

It is time that HRM in modern workplaces changes from a stoic observer to an active participant in the pursuit of corporate objectives by using new concepts and ideas from other disciplines. In this paper, the author has tried to adapt the concept of 'participatory communication' to the functioning between top management and knowledge employees. Participatory Communication (PC) is one of the newest branches of communication study that focuses on sharing of meanings and ideas to improve effectiveness of an organization intending to benefit a community. The paper gives a theoretical model on how PC can be incorporated in HRM policy of a knowledge sector company. It also discusses a few of the likely challenges and their solutions in planning, implementation and evaluation stages. The paper concludes with the observation that this model may be adapted by companies to bring out optimum performance from their employees and to set industry benchmarks in employee retention and satisfaction.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Knowledge Workers, Communication Strategy

INTRODUCTION

One of the poignant developments of this century is the emergence of 'knowledge' as a major source of comparative advantage in global trade and economy. Countries that were earlier considered resource poor or moderate economies like Brazil, Vietnam, India, Kenya and other Afro Asian countries are now among the fastest growing economies in the world. Knowledge industries like Information Technology (IT), telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, aviation etc, are innovation driven, have long product development cycles, and their human resources are critical not only for sustenance and growth, but also for competitive advantage.

In today's workplaces digitisation, globalisation and connectivity has made almost every field a knowledge industry, with constant product development, improvement and customer centric approach. How do we then distinguish the knowledge worker from say a worker in a modern computerised manufacturing unit? A knowledge worker is an asset to the company even without any machines or infrastructures. His or her knowledge, skill and experience

form a part of the core capital of the firm which is *non tangible and cannot be easily replaced*. An essential part of their job requirement is the ability to think, assimilate and innovate based on their specialised knowledge about the products and/or services of the organization they work for. As employees, they are paid high remuneration for their expertise in a specified field of work and are given autonomy to bring out their best creative potential.

Knowledge workers also form quite a challenge for the Human Resource Department (HRD) of the organization. Since the company is heavily dependent on these 'thinkers' among its employees, there is an added pressure on the HRD to keep them optimally engaged and motivated. The new age concept of 'workforce analytics' that uses a combination of software, statistical models and enormous amounts of employee data to achieve optimum performance has made this task easier. But still when it comes to engaging and retaining the best minds in a knowledge based industry, there is no fixed model or method that works for all. Applications of new approaches and 'out of the box' thinking by HRM to improve employee engagement and retention is the key to

keep the knowledge workers happy, much like the work they do every day.

Two important requirements for a knowledge based organization to thrive are networking and communication. Both of these depend on sharing of ideas and active participation of people in not just functional but also social and cultural contexts. The idea of communicating from bottom up to top layers of hierarchy without fear or expectation is the core of participatory process that has significant benefits for all management functions, more so for HRM.

This paper presents the use of ‘participatory communication’ as a HR tool for effective employee engagement and retention in the knowledge based industry. It may be even further developed as a strategic or analytical tool for HR in these sectors. The concept is based on the insights gained by the author during her in depth study of participatory communication and its application as part of her PhD Research.

Let us first emphasize on why employee engagement and retention are core competencies of any HRM function in knowledge industries.

Importance of Engagement and Retention in Knowledge Based Industry

The greatest assets of an organization in any knowledge based industry are its people, the talent pool in the form of skill, experience and expertise of its employees. While the focus of this industry in the earlier decades was on recruiting the best minds, now the importance of reducing turnover rates is being stressed as a key HR objective. When a talented employee leaves the company he/she does not just take a share of knowledge but also the bonds and networks formed over the tenure with other employees. This is especially true of the knowledge workers. The impact of losing a good employee is downright negative for other members of the team and often if a suitable replacement is not found soon, the entire project may fail. The HR department therefore goes to great lengths to make sure that their key employees are happy, engaged and loyal to the company. Engaged workers are those who have a high degree of commitment to their jobs and to the organization they work for. Such workers are the easiest to retain, so both the concepts are closely related.

One of the key factors that most knowledge workers look for in their job profile is the way in which the company will help them gain more skills and knowledge. They want to learn more than what they already know and this can happen by having a culture of open discussions free communication

in the workplace. Having a participatory communication approach in designing job profiles, selection of team members, deciding on criteria for rewards and perks can be an effective way of increasing engagement and retention.

Participatory Communication and Its Relevance to Knowledge Industry

A knowledge organisation with well defined structure, hierarchies, and multiple levels of decision making needs effective communication to link all its functions and people so as to achieve their vision and mission. Free flow of ideas, sharing opinions about company policy and leadership, both positive and negative without expectation of personal benefit or fear of censure is especially important to build team spirit and camaraderie. This often becomes difficult because the nature of their work is such that they are cut off from the rest of the employees of the department and are constantly on guard to prevent any leaking of critical information related to their work. But not all issues even in a highly innovation driven company need to be discussed inside closed doors, and sharing of information that is for common good of all employees must be encouraged.

According to Soundararajan and Singh (2017), at different levels of career employees tend to have different criteria to decide whether they want to continue in the same place or find a new organization. For example, at the entry level an engineer may focus on learning opportunities, career growth and of course remuneration. Another employee in the same department at a senior level may give more importance to peer respect, recognition from the company and leadership roles available. It is then a job for the HR department to customize their strategies and policies to suit varied requirements of employees at all levels. This is now being done with the help of new methods and operations like periodic satisfaction surveys, exit interviews, analysing employee needs before they are formally stated etc. But there remains a gap in communication between the top level management like the CEO and Directors, the HR Department and the employees when it comes to giving feedback and bottom up flow of information.

This is where HRM can borrow the concept of ‘Participatory Communication’ from social sciences, Development Communication in particular.

According to Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) Participatory Communication is a process that allows ‘*sharing of information, perceptions and opinions among various stakeholders that leads to their empowerment*’. Though the concept of PC is mostly applied to development projects and community related systems, it can be used at any level

of decision making where multiple parties are involved, as described in the following sections. Any functional system that has a set of people as deciding authorities and a set of people who are beneficiaries of those decisions or policies can use the idea of PC to improve the outcome.

Bessette (2004) explains the differences between the two dominant paradigms relevant to development communication field in present times – ‘*diffusion of innovation*’ approach and the ‘*participatory*’ model. In the context of HRM in a knowledge organization, diffusion of communication comprises of dissemination of information to maximum number of people, like newsletters, memos, notices, group emails regarding HR policies and programs. The participatory component focuses on interpersonal communication, dialogue and discussion among the employees on HR issues identified by them, and bottom-up channels of communication that reach to the top management. Both the aspects are important in maintaining effective communication in and among all departments.

Having a Participatory Communication approach will help the HR Department identify specific issues about the company that are a source of motivation and those that are potential pitfalls for engagement and retention. This is not to say that every decision has to be made on participatory lines, which would be impractical and even detrimental to the mission of the organisation. But if the employees and management can sit together and identify areas of the HR function in which participation can improve the functioning, it will add to the sense of belonging and ownership among the employees. How this can be achieved is explained in the following section.

IV Theoretical Model to incorporate Participatory Communication approach into HRM in Knowledge Industry

Participatory Communication (PC) can be used to strengthen the bond between team members of a department, between departments and the HR, and also between employees and the top management. This was one of the main insights gained by the author in her research on the subject of participatory communication and how it can improve the overall functioning of a multi layered decision making system, such as public sector healthcare. In the present context we will focus on how PC can help in resolving HR issues that a particular department in a knowledge based company may have.

Bessette (2004) has given a framework of ten steps to implement PC in Human Development context. This model

begins with encouraging the members of a community to identify their common problems and issues through discussions. These discussions need to be facilitated by the communication experts overseeing the process. After reaching a consensus on defining the problem, the next level of PC process is to list out all possible solutions and likely problems in implementing each of them. This step is very crucial and this is where the ‘free flow of ideas’ context is most useful. The process culminates in the members of community working out their own solutions and the best means of communication to execute the same.

Applying this theory to knowledge based organizations, where the knowledge workers are the beneficiaries, HRM is the facilitator of PC process and the top management plays the role of change drivers, we can propose the following PC-HRM model:

The PC-HRM Model of Communication for Knowledge Industry based on the Ten Steps for Participatory Communication (Bessette, 2004) is presented as follows:

Step 1: Use of preliminary data collection to understand issues related to HRM that the knowledge workers would like to address.

Step 2: Involving all the knowledge workers of a department in the identification of a particular HR problem and its possible solutions.

Step 3: Identifying the different knowledge workers in other related departments (who have regular interactions amongst them) to decide on which solution would be the best for the given HR issue.

Step 4: Identifying specific communication needs, objectives and activities related to selected initiative that will need contribution from all employees of a department.

Step 5: Identifying appropriate management strategies to carry on the task, and getting the top management on board.

Step 6: Preparing and pre-testing HR strategies for the improvement.

Step 7: Facilitating partnerships, regular meetings and discussions about the execution of the plan.

Step 8: Producing an implementation plan in consultation with employees with timelines for completion of the process.

Step 9: Monitoring and evaluating the PC process, the selected strategy and documenting the whole process.

Step 10: Planning the sharing and utilization of results for future HR requirements.

The above mentioned steps can be used to initialize the PC approach and make the employees comfortable with the culture of open discussions and free flow of opinions, information, ideas, etc. After the concept is fairly grounded as a management practice, the HR Department can try to set up a communication system in the organization that reaches the opinions of every individual knowledge worker all the way up to the top management.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge workers are among the greatest assets of any organization, but more so in the knowledge based industrial sectors. Knowledge itself is beyond boundaries of subjects and epistemology, and hence concepts should be freely borrowed and applied across different fields. This paper has attempted to show the scope of participatory communication in successfully engaging and retaining knowledge workers by giving them opportunities to freely interact, discuss and share opinions in a way that makes them feel connected to

the company. Using this approach may give new ideas and information to the HR department about how the employees perceive their programs and policies, and also about the organization's leadership. Suitable application of this concept as a HR strategy may provide added incentive to employees to give their best output to the organization and to society in general.

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