

The Pizza Lunch Strategy

How well do you know the concerns of your employees? What are they doing to make a difference? What are they frustrated about? What's on their minds?

3 Lessons

With the increasing influence of social networking, there are 3 key lessons for each of us.

1. Employees will openly share their satisfaction and frustrations using social networking media and email.
2. Social media provides a vehicle to unify thought and action in a way never seen before.
3. The almost instantaneous upheaval created when frustrations and disillusionment reach a flash point can extend into any organized group of people including a business.

Gather Relevant Information

What are the implications of these lessons for a CEO? How can you efficiently and effectively identify issues and address them proactively before a flash point is reached?

Every CEO should establish several ways to continuously gain accurate information on employee concerns. An annual employee satisfaction survey is a good first step but not sufficient. A robust and effective Human Resources group and close confidants can be your eyes and ears on many issues. However, when working through others, be wary of the "Emperor Has No Clothes" syndrome.

First hand information is always best. One successful technique I've used effectively over the years is the pizza lunch. You can adopt this approach to whatever works for you and your organization. Here is how to implement this strategy.

90 Minutes a Month

Monthly, have HR select a diverse cross section of 10-12 employees at different levels and from different functions and invite them to have an informal pizza lunch with you. After everyone has their pizza and sits down, begin the lunch discussion.

- Going clockwise around the table, ask everyone to take a few minutes to introduce themselves and their role. Then they should describe one thing they are working on that they are particularly proud to share with the group.
- Going counter-clockwise around the table, ask everyone to share one thing they are frustrated with that they would like to see improved.
- Then take time for an unstructured Q and A where they can ask you anything they want.

This simple process takes only 90 minutes a month. That's less than 0.7% of your working time. The value derived for the time invested (ROT) can be invaluable.

Benefits

In addition to gaining firsthand information of things going right and what could be improved, the lunch provides many other important benefits.

- New relationships are established at different levels across different departments.
- Everyone learns about good things that are happening in their company.
- Speaking about frustration without reprisal establishes and supports a culture of trust, openness and candor.
- The questions they ask provide valuable insights into future topics that you can address.

For the cost of several pizzas and 90 minutes of time, the rewards can be exceptional. More importantly, the risk of being unpleasantly surprised by an organized Twitter or other social network campaign is diminished.

Act On What You Learn

The only caveat is that you must act on what you learn. There is nothing worse than to hear issues and concerns and then don't respond. Your employees will watch carefully to see what you do with the information you shared. Will there be reprisals? Will you publicize success in your talks and all-hands meetings? Will you remove barriers that block their success? Will you simplify the bureaucracy or add even more policies and procedures. If you decide to maintain status quo, explain why.

If you act responsibly, the word will get around very quickly. If not, you will miss an opportunity to get the unvarnished truth and make a real difference as a leader.