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APPLIED BUSINESS INVESTIGATION
TASK 2 - BUSINESS REPORT

Exploring Effective Internal Communication in a Local Authority



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1. Introduction

The Local Government Association Peer Review in 2019 (Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge, Bolsover District Council Feedback Report 2019) highlighted that internal communication was an issue for BDC. A number of recommendations were made including reviewing these communications, improving engagement, to make senior managers more accessible and removing inconsistencies in how staff are communicated with.

In addition the researcher was eager to explore this further having identified from personal experience a lack opportunities to communicate with senior leaders and share ideas, as well as a lack of cascade of internal communication to lower level tier officers.

This report presents the findings and recommendations from an Applied Business Investigation into effective internal communication within a local authority setting. By seeking a variety of perspectives into this subject area, this report is able to set out a number of recommendations to Bolsover District Council (BDC) to improve internal communications, to enhance employee engagement and create an effective forum for two way communication.

The report provides an overview of the context and rationale for undertaking the project, looks at stakeholder involvement, presents key findings and examines financial implications. This report concludes with a discussion about how this impacts the council and provides a number of recommendations.

2. Context and rationale for the project

To shape the aims and objectives, discussions took place with the Executive Director with responsibility for communications and human resources. This was to seek agreement with the research project but to identify what corporately BDC wanted to achieve and to explore his ideas for the project as well as what he felt needed to be discovered from officers in order to take this further. This Executive Director also agreed to be interviewed as part of the process.

The research investigation aimed to examine the communication at BDC with a view to identify if officers felt there was an issue as suggested by the LGA, and to seek their opinion as to where there needed to be improvement. The aim of the research project was therefore defined as *“to have more effective internal communication within Bolsover District Council and to have two way flow of information and communication between officers and Senior Leadership Team”* with the specific research objective to

- To understand what internal communication within the public sector is
- To identify the enablers and challenges to effective internal communication
- To review and identify what internal communication is needed from senior managers to increase employee engagement, enhance employee level of commitment, to achieve better decision making processes aligned to the aims and ambitions of the Council.
- To establish an internal communication plan by which internal communication is delivered within Bolsover District Council taking into account the purpose and process needed.

A literature review was undertaken which examined what is already known about internal communication. The literature recognised there was a number of definitions for this type of communication, all of which acknowledged it is fundamental to effective management and employee engagement, with benefit to both the organisation and employees alike. The term internal communication was adopted.

Literature suggests that internal communication is largely concerned with working towards the achievement of a common goal, however primarily from a management perspective, with top down communication to command, instruct or persuade someone to do something without the opportunity to feedback and comment.

The general consensus was two way communication between senior managers and employees is possible and leads to engaged employees but how this should be done is widely debated.

Employee voice is critical to employee engagement and consideration should be given as to how this is heard and responded to as well as consideration as to the form of media used when communicating. In addition there is the need for reciprocity and a genuine organisational commitment to enable two way communication.

Whilst the literature wasn't very specific with regards to this within a local authority setting, rather this was aimed at profit making companies, the majority of principles and more importantly the benefits could be applied to BDC. It was widely recognised that effective internal communication has many benefits to an organisation, including staff retention, increased productivity and engaged staff. This identified gap in the research has helped drive the research project.

3. Engaging with stakeholders

Stakeholder management involves identifying stakeholders, analysing their needs, expectations and engaging with them. Staff are important stakeholders in this project with high power and high interest in the internal communications of the council. They therefore require full engagement.

Whilst the LGA had recommendations as to what needed to be done with regards to internal communications this was based on a small selection of open discussions with officers in a group interviews.

To achieve a greater understanding as to the perception of what internal effective communication is with a local authority, and specifically BDC, 12 semi structured interviews were carried out.

These participants were selected from a number of different departments and levels of seniority within the council to seek multiple perspectives. Some were specifically chosen with the knowledge they had worked at other local authorities so could offer some insight into how this works in different organisations.

In the majority of cases there was an established relationship between the researcher and the participants. This was needed to some extent as given the researchers

position within the authority some members of staff if picked randomly may not have been honest in their answers or comments. In order to ensure that a cross section of officers were interviewed participants were selected from multiple levels within the authority, some new and some very long standing (40 years service), and some based away from the main site, some managing officers working from home or those without email access.

The interviews were structured around the research objectives and included specific questions on;

- What the participant understood effective internal communication to be and how they received this
- Two way communication, what this meant and if it was important
- To identify enablers and barriers to internal effective communication
- And to seek suggestions and experiences as to when it has worked well, and not so well

The two Executive Directors were supportive of the research project having both expressed the desire to improve internal communication especially the two way communication and how to actively encouraged service managers to report back to senior leadership team.

In addition the researchers work based mentor, a member of SLT, was very supportive of the project, recognising that there were improvements that could be made.

4. Ethics

Prior approval was sought from both BDC and Sheffield Hallam in undertaking this research project. Participants were given the reassurance of anonymity and confidentiality in the process, and were given multiple opportunities to withdraw from the process if they changed their minds.

5. Key findings

In order to develop strategic priorities for improving effective internal communication the results of the interviews were subject to focused coding and thematic analysis.

This identified a number of themes which all suggested that there needed to be more effective and meaningful two way communication.

5.1 Leadership and Management

Leadership and management were prominent themes with participants suggesting that the flow of information was only as good as the manager above them. Some participants felt very informed, some felt they were not told anything. It seemed to be service managers that reported this, suggesting SLT were creating a communication blockage. The findings suggested that service managers tended to be much better at communicating. Importantly there was inconsistency in the approach to team meetings and one to ones which offer the individual an opportunity to feedback, and up, to more senior managers. Time and availability was also discussed with the suggestion a consequence of being a lean council meant often people were just too busy to be able to communicate.

5.2 Culture

Culture was a key theme with most suggesting there needed to be an improved culture of sharing information, being open and receptive to feedback for improved internal communication to take effect. One senior manager reflected historically this wasn't very good and that this needed to change but acknowledged we needed to do more about this. This correlates with participants acknowledging that there was a need to have the right culture within the organisation, yet only 2 of the 12 suggesting we had this already.

5.3 Political

The culture of the council is significantly linked to the fact BDC is a local authority and hierarchically in nature. The decision making process is often taken by those at the top and in order to encourage two way communication we need to look to be a listening authority with a flattened hierarchy and a means to encourage and seek officer feedback and a way to listen to the employee voice.

5.4 Method and Media

The method and media used for communication depending on the message was a key finding. Unsurprisingly most indicating face to face was the preferred method of

communication. Many participants gave examples as to how this has worked historically at BDC and within other local authorities, with the roadshow style question and answer session with Executive Directors and SLT being a very popular approach. Other findings which need exploring further were finding a balance in the amount of communication, and the need to tailor to the audience both in terms of content and media used. Comments were made about the increased use of emails and the culture of being copied into everything and that this meant sometimes important things got missed.

5.5 Two way communication

All the emerging themes led to one overarching theme, the importance of two way communication, as many people do not feel listened to. It was clear that officers had a good understanding of what this was, with all recognising its importance yet most did not feel this was working as it should within BDC. The inconsistencies with team meetings and one to ones meant that for some there was very limited opportunity two way communication with their line managers and more importantly no clear way of two way communication with SLT.

6. Impact to the organisation

Employees are key stakeholders in the council. Where the employee feels connected to the organisation they work for, feel part of the decision making process and understand the goal they are working towards the literature shows there is increased productivity for the organisation.

The findings have clearly demonstrated that officers at different levels within the council feel distant and disconnected from senior management, and this is felt more the further down the hierarchy. The vast majority making suggestions as to how this could be improved, suggesting they already had an opinion on this.

The research has highlighted that there is more that the council, specifically executive directors and SLT can and should be doing, to improve internal communication and to facilitate a two way flow of communication between them and officers at all levels.

Employee engagement is most effective when it becomes part of an organisations culture and should not just be a once a year event. There needs to be a significant culture shift within the council, to recognise staff as our biggest investment and prioritised accordingly. For any change to be effective it needs to be fully supported by the senior leaders to lead this change with a commitment to deliver even though some may feel uncomfortable about this new way of working.

For BDC an engaged workforce, who have a commitment to the authority, would enhance staff retention, lead to greater productivity, and everyone working to achieve a common aim. Put simply this means getting more work done within the same amount of time or resource. As stated above the council is facing austerity measures and the need to do more for less has never been so important.

When employees care about doing a good job, this comes through in the conversations they have with customers, for the council this is the residents of the district who can then be advocates for the council when it comes to selling the services, whether this be a profit making element of the council or encouraging new people and businesses to move into the district. All of which has a positive financial implication for BDC.

The participants interviewed were all seeking meaningful communication with the senior leaders and showed a willingness to engage if the opportunities were there. It was however acknowledged that some officers merely want to 'turn up, do the job and get paid.' This would need to be considered carefully as some officers will not want to engage and that will be difficult to change, however dependent on the nature of the role that may not be required to the same extent as others.

7. Financial implications

7.1 Costs

For the council to have effective internal communication which allows for meaningful two way communication there needs to be an investment in implementing the recommendations below.

Literature referred to transformational leaders and having the right culture. For these recommendations to be implemented at BDC, there will need to be a culture change, by SLT and service managers. Inconsistencies in how managers communicate and conduct team meetings suggest there may be a need for some training as to how to communicate effectively, and we should be looking to invest in officers to create future leaders.

The council is facing increasingly difficult financial decisions in an effort to be lean, self-sufficient and more importantly to be able to deliver statutory services. However a real investment, both time and money into officers will always lead to increased productivity and performance as well as unity of council aims and ambitions. This initial investment is likely to be incredibly effective and a return on investment is possible.

The general consensus was that senior leadership is not always as available as it should be and that face to face communication or interaction is much better. The examples given by participants of 'chief briefs' and roadshows events would require officers and senior leaders to attend a joint meeting. This could range from a few hours every 4-6 months or something more frequent but smaller scale which the SLT time was used but less officer time needed. Whichever route were to be chose, would mean time away from the day to day role, this would carry with it a financial cost in officer time and productivity.

Ownership of the process was an issue, with some confusion as to who does or should have conduct of the internal communications, on some occasions this was the communication team, the HR department or various assistant directors. A decision would need to be made corporately who is responsible for the internal communications and whether this can be picked up within existing staffing resources. For these recommendations to be implemented and be truly effective the reality is at the very minimum a dedicated officer would need to drive this. With on costs this would likely be £50,000 per annum.

7.2 Benefits

The Transformational Fund, is a pot of money the Council hold and which can be used for transformational 'invest to save' type projects. Where possible with a return on investment. It is suggested that this could be used to recruit a project manager who could lead on the actions listed within the action plan below. This post will be instrumental in leading a programme of cultural change and leading on the development and introduction of an Internal Communication Strategy.

A benefit of engaged officers is often better staff retention. By reducing the turnover of staff and the need to recruit and train can also have a financial impact on the authority so by limiting staff turnover this can be reduced.

With all officers working towards one common goal, we are more aligned and joined up in thinking and approaches. If officers and SLT are engaging with each other, and breaking down silos, ideas will be shared which has the potential to lead to joint cross department projects. Cost savings by joint projects and procurement can also be achieved.

8 Recommendations and Next Steps

The research has identified the need for more direct communication from executive directors and SLT to operational levels, and thereby removing some hierarchy. In addition, a clear method of communication depending on the nature of the message and whom it affects, as well as a way of encouraging two way communication across all levels. These changes could be captured within a clear internal communication strategy.

An internal communication strategy allows the council to set out where we want to be in terms of having an engaged workforce with increased employee satisfaction, greater staff retention and to ensure staff are aware of the councils ambitions, with us all working towards one goal. It should be simple and deliverable with SMART objectives should so we can measure success of the strategy.

There are a number of relatively straight forward changes that could be implemented, with minimal costs and time resource needed, for example circulating SLT minutes, even if some of these are abridged due to sensitive items, and ADs to attend team meetings once a quarter and Executive Directors to attend every 6 months for one agenda item as a minimum which actively seeks staff feedback. Actions that will need more time and thought given to them are who takes ownership for internal communication and to appoint a project manager to lead on this.

There are some medium term actions which involve seeking the views and opinions of staff. One survey would be focused specifically on service managers and what forum they feel is most conducive to two way communication with SLT. Another survey, to all staff to identify the preferred method of communication based on subject, the frequency of communications and the ability to feed back in a quick and timely manner.

Some medium and longer term actions which will be necessary, which need a financial commitment to be successful. These will include training for SLT and service managers on communication skills, a roadshow style event with SLT and the Executive Directors and setting up a staff engagement panel.

As stated above it will be essential for the Council to invest in this project if it is to achieve meaningful two way communication with staff, and by having a dedicated officer to lead on this shows a true commitment to staff that the Council has listened to feedback on this subject.

These actions all ultimately feed into an Internal Communication Strategy for the Council, which would set out the council's goals in communicating with officers, plans the actions required to achieve these goals with realistic time scales and will ensure everyone is aware of what is accepted. It is important that this is a meaningful document and not merely a tick box exercise.

A series of SMART objectives would need to be established with KPIs that can be reviewed over time to evaluate the success of the Strategy. Annual audit could be

achieved in follow up surveys to see if messages have had an impact on staff, and in focus groups.

Suggested KPI would include, increasing survey participation rate within the first 6 months, increasing staff retention measures over 12 months and decreasing absenteeism. A specific KPI could also be around future leaders and monitoring internal promotions.

The proposed short, medium and long term recommendations are pulled together with time scales, priority rating and resource implications in the Action Plan below.

		Task	Time frame	Priority 1 – low to 5 – high	Resource/ Funding required	Action Owner
Short term	1	Consider creating a role for internal communication coordinator who could lead on the actions suggested below	1 month	5	Costs of recruitment and annual salary approximately £50K per annum	SLT, internal approval needed for new post and use of transformation fund
	2	SLT minutes to be circulated to Service Managers and placed on ERIC, redacted where needed.	1 month	5	Minimal – minutes taken already, no additional resource needed to share these	SLT Admin
	3	Establish a staff engagement panel with volunteers from all levels, HR, Comms and SLT champion	2 months	4	Officer time and admin for minute taking	SLT, HR and Comms – coordinated by SLT champion
	4	Team Meeting frequency and agenda to be reviewed, section specifically on inviting feedback from staff	2 months	2	Minimal could be done within SLT and team meetings with a deadline to report back to a nominated officer to analysis data	Staff Engagement Panel

	5	Regular attendance by SLT and Executive Directors at Team Meetings	2-4 months	2	Officer time only	SLT/ED
	6	One to one frequency and process to be reviewed, section specifically on inviting feedback	2 months	5	Minimal could be done within SLT and team meetings with a deadline to report back to a nominated officer to analysis data	Staff Engagement Panel
	7	Meeting with HR, Comms and SLT to decide who takes ownership of internal communication. Agree format for urgent all staff emails and subject style	2 months	3	Minimal HR and Comms rep could be invited to attend SLT and discuss	SLT champion and ED
Medium Term	8	SLT members, including Executive Directors to attend corporate inductions to show SLT are approachable and we are an inclusive, listening	3-6 months	3	Inductions take place approx. every few months and this should be trialled for 3 months and if successful permanently adopted. Officer time only – 30 mins every 2 months and could be on a rota basis	HR (with new post when in place)
	9	Survey to service managers to identify what information they feel they need from SLT, how they would like to	3-6 months	3	The performance team undertake regular internal and external survey so could undertake this piece of work at no cost to the authority	Performance Team (new post when in place)

		comment and feedback, what they liked from the service managers forum, what they didn't like and if they have any suggestions as to how it could work better				
	10	All staff survey re preferred method of communication based on subject, frequency and the ability to feed back in a quick and timely manner.	3-6 months	3	The performance team undertake regular internal and external survey so could undertake this piece of work at no cost to the authority	Performance Team (new post when in place)
	11	Relaunch the service manager's forum based on information from the surveys Dates of the year to be sent for each year and attendance to be mandatory	6 months	4	Officer time for attendance will be required. This would be 1-2 hours every 2 months so wouldn't adversely impact on resource	Staff Engagement Panel/SLT champion and new post when in place
Long term	12	TRAINING re for SLT and Service Managers on communication and listening skills.	6-9 months	4	Financial cost of external training, offer time. SLT could be within an SLT meeting and SMF within SMF meeting	New post

	13	Plan and launch a chiefs briefs – surveys will feed into the format, frequency and location. Local elections in May 2023, after this the 1 st event could be to explain councils ambitions	6-12 months	4	There would be a resource costs based on officer time away from the day job. This is likely to be 2 hours every 6 months initially	New post
	14	Internal Communication Strategy	12 months	5	We may was to commission this piece of work which will have a financial cost as well as costs associated with staff consultation	New post