

The truth? Your employees can handle it, so just communicate with them, already

THE BIGGEST challenge in communicating with employees today is not coping with a culturally diverse work force, overcoming the impersonalization of e-mail or battling information overload to get your message across. Instead, it's getting employees to trust you and offer ideas for improving the business.

It was one of Tory Johnson's eight employees who first suggested expanding New York City-based Women For Hire LLC to the West Coast in 2004. "It wasn't a case where I said, 'We are going to expand and I want you to figure out what the best cities are,'" says Johnson, 34, founder and CEO of the \$2 million career-fair organizer. "Someone came to me and said, 'Here's what I think, and here's why.' We did it, and it's been a huge growth opportunity for us."

While Johnson gives the employee credit for the suggestion, she says that her efforts to create a workplace where bottom-up communication is encouraged laid the groundwork. And it takes more than a memo, she says. She starts with the hiring process, asking candidates to describe an occasion when they disagreed with a co-worker or a boss, rejecting those who demur in favor of outspoken types.

After hiring, Johnson continues to stress the need for employee input, telling them by e-mail and phone as well as face to face that she values them and expects feedback, even when it's negative. "It's very important to me to have people who are honest and true to their beliefs, vs. saying what they think I want to hear just because I sign their paychecks," she says.

Employers would do well to return the candor, says Shel Holtz, principal of Holtz Communication + Technology in Concord, California, and author of *Corporate Conversations: A Guide to Crafting Effective and Appropriate Internal Communications*. That means being upfront about bad news as well as good when it affects the company. "Employees who are well-informed about the business can recognize change and know what they can do to address that," he says.

Companies with engaged employees will experience double-digit growth more often than those in which workers feel untrusted and unheard by the leadership, Holtz says. "What leads to engagement is trust," he adds. Companies create trust by considering employees' best interests and inviting them to take part in decisions.

When Pleasanton, California, communications coach Carmine Gallo interviewed a Hall-of-Fame list of entrepreneurs from Starbucks' Howard Schultz to Monster.com's Jeff Taylor for his book, *Simple Secrets of the World's Greatest Business Communicators*, trust was a common theme. "The word authentic kept coming up," Gallo says.

What does authentic mean? And how do you communicate it? Gallo says any medium, from company newsletters to personal phone calls, can and should be used. "It's making people feel as though they share the vision, to open up their enthusiasm and passion by sharing stories about why you're doing what you do, says Gallo. "I've heard from several admired business leaders that never before has such a premium been placed on building trust and showing integrity."

While communicating with your employees can be challenging, the good news is that it's not difficult to do things to motivate and empower workers that bigger companies will find hard to match. "Employees demand more than paychecks, and smart leaders know it," says Gallo. "Today's employees want to be nurtured, inspired and recognized for their achievements, and they want to feel part of something great."

by [Mark Henricks](#)