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**LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION**

Informal lunches can make those at the top more accessible to the workforce

**ANN HOOD**

# OUT TO LUNCH – BREAKING BREAD WITH LEADERS

**Informal lunches with employees can make senior leaders more visible and accessible to the workforce. The key, says Ann Hood, head of employee communications at Scottish & Newcastle UK, is a simple format and regular feedback. Here, she describes how leadership lunches at a previous employer contributed to building a more united company.**

Following the acquisition of a major US company, my previous employer, UK utility ScottishPower, became a collection of companies, each with their own structures, cultures and loyal, long-serving employees. But there was a lack of integration as each company had their own leadership group, strategic objectives, mission statements and values.

To build more integration, the official leadership team, led by a new CEO, approved a major structural and cultural change program. The objectives were to build a united company from within, with an integrated and strong internal message, and to change and develop the profile of the CEO and the executive team.

### More face-to-face comms

Key to delivering this change strategy was to ensure all 14,000 employees across the US and UK knew and understood the company's strategy and how they could contribute. This meant increasing face-to-face communication from the executive team.

After an intensive first few months working with the senior managers, the team began a program of informal or "brown bag" lunches. Each of the nine senior executives agreed to host at least one lunch per month, with the aim of a minimum of six per year. This was across all locations and was built around their planned visits wherever possible.

The objective for these lunches was to raise the profile of the executive team and the company strategy with the wider internal audience.

### Keeping the format simple

The format was very simple. A group of employees from all levels of the company was selected and invited to attend the lunch by e-mail, or via team leaders in areas where e-mail access was limited. We would usually ask around 25 people to reach the 15 that we wanted.

The group was invited to spend an hour hearing first hand about the company strategy and performance, as well as some personal background on the leader hosting the lunch. Then the discussion was opened up for questions and answers.

### Preparing leaders

To help leaders prepare for the lunch, I created a brief for each event explaining who was attending, a list of their job titles and location, some of the hot issues from their part of the business and topics being discussed around the water cooler. This was particularly useful if people were too shy to ask the hard questions.

We also gave very simple guidelines that were based on feedback from previous lunches, such as:

• Shake hands with everyone and thank them for attending.
• Introduce yourself and ask each person to do the same.
• Share your objectives for the lunch.
• In the Q&A, let attendees know that there's nothing that they can't ask and that you'll be honest with your replies.

### Getting feedback from employees

Feedback was sought after each lunch. A thank-you e-mail was sent by the leader to all attendees, with a summary of topics covered, a promise to answer any unanswered questions and a feedback request from internal communication.

Throughout the five years that this program ran, we usually got feedback from all attendees, which was overwhelmingly positive. In particular, the Q&A section was always well received, as employees felt that it was open and honest.

Negative comments were few and far between, although use of jargon and the complexity of some of the business explanations – particularly around the share price – left some delegates confused. Some employees also requested time to eat their lunch before the leader arrived.

### Most popular tool

While this format was well-known in the US, in the UK business it was unheard of and initially it was a little scary for the leaders and employees. But the results were good across the organization.

The lunches began in 2001 and were still running successfully when I left ScottishPower in 2006. In fact, this was the most popular and impactful communication tool that we used during that time. We hosted around 500 lunches with employees in eight of our key locations, meeting with over 7,500 employees in the UK and US.

It's worth noting that the success of these sessions was generally down to the personalities of the leaders. Those who were less engaging didn't get as much out of it and the response was less positive. Ultimately, this sort of open form of communication just isn't for every leader.

**Ann Hood is head of employee communications at Scottish & Newcastle UK. Prior to taking up this role in 2006, she spent over seven years with ScottishPower where she was responsible for PR, crisis and issue management. Hood has over 16 years' experience working in communication.**