Human Resources

Getting Employees to Speak Up May Require Culture Change

Getting employees to raise their ideas or point out problems may require a culture change in traditionally hierarchical organizations, consultants say.

But the effort is worth it for creative problem-solving, not to mention that hesitant employees may know about safety concerns or critical business hazards.

Take the utility employee who was too scared to tell the CEO about a flaw in a $2 billion transaction, because the head honcho responded with ''dismissive gestures'' to employee concerns, Stephen Paskoff, founder and CEO of ELI Inc., told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 2, speaking from personal experience. Atlanta-based ELI helps other companies build a respectful, diverse, and ethical culture.

''It's the hardest thing to do, I think, to speak up about problems, concerns or ideas that would benefit the organization, even in the most welcoming organization,'' Paskoff said. ''People have fears about speaking up to authority. It's a cultural issue—you can't change it by a lot of the things companies rely on,'' such as policies or training.

Need to Convince Leadership It's Important Employees won't respond to ''things constructed by lawyers and HR,'' Paskoff added. ''If you want to change culture, you've got to have some way to convince top leadership that it's critical, not something that's meaningless.''

He recalled an incident 20 years ago where he saw the leader of a manufacturing organization talk to his team about safety. The problem was, he ''read a statement somebody else wrote for him,'' which Paskoff said ''says I don't care enough about this to read it in my own voice.''

To create a culture that truly welcomes employee input, Paskoff said that policies, hotlines, and other support structures are essential, along with senior leaders who ''demonstrate through their own behavior that they see it as important'' and communicate clearly that they welcome hearing about problems.

The organization must also ''hold people accountable,'' he said, rewarding those who raise good ideas and dealing with supervisors who turn away employees with concerns.

At the Boston Consulting Group, employee contributions are encouraged by having ''a mid-level facilitator'' for each team so that ''the most junior member of the team feels empowered to speak up,'' Frances Brooks Taplett, global consulting people director, told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 2. The system has been in place for more than 10 years, she said.

''HR should implement a system for giving and receiving feedback anonymously via pulse surveys,'' Andee Harris, chief engagement officer at Chicago-based performance management and employee engagement software company HighGround, suggested. ''This way, employees have a safe, non-public forum to share their positive and negative thoughts and provide solutions.''

Also, ''managers should address their employees' input during one-on-one check-ins and take action if needed,'' she told Bloomberg BNA in an Aug. 2 email. HR should train managers on how to hold those meetings, Harris added.

Taplett said the goal should be a culture that ''takes the fear out'' for junior employees to speak up, and ''changes the willingness to listen'' on the part of leadership. ''It has to be both top down and bottom up,'' she said.

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