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Friends or foes? : Are your employees ambassadors or detractors

December 2004

There are numerous business models and tools that have been developed to enable leadership teams to cascade their thinking throughout the organisation. And employees are 'surveyed out', regularly completing questionnaires about how happy they are, how well informed they feel, how effective the organisation is at setting its vision and values.....

It is our belief that, whilst this is really important, it also, quite simply, is not enough.

All of these approaches regard employees as a passive mass, waiting to receive communications, waiting to receive leadership and waiting to receive instructions. The challenge for true leaders is harnessing the value of their employees through engaging them in new and more dynamic ways, conducting real conversations with people that are about developing the strategy, not merely implementing it.

This inevitably results in new responsibilities for the management team and it also results in new responsibilities for the employee. The time has come for action not words, demonstrations of leadership, clarification of mutual expectations, roles and responsibilities and fundamentally for conversation, not monologues.



Opinion Leader Research (part of Chime Communications) manages the Opinion Leader Panel, an omnibus survey of senior decision makers drawn from politics, the media, the city, corporates and NGOs, Think Tanks and Academia. We interviewed 102 Opinion Leaders on 1-8 November 2004.

Employees as ambassadors

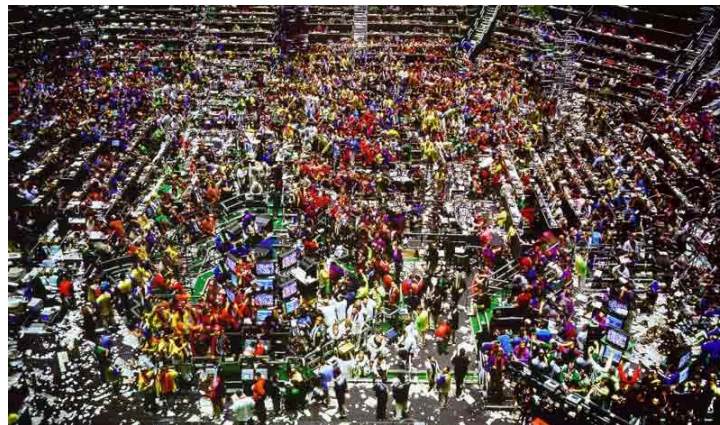
Employees can be an organisation's most influential and powerful communicators. The challenge is to ensure that your employees become active partners in your tomorrow and not passive implementers of your today. This is one of the key roles of a leader and one that will pay real reputational dividends.

65% believe that communicating with staff is one of the two single most important communications issues faced by leaders of organisations

An organisation's employees are the ones that hold real sway in all communities and networks. They can be your most powerful ambassadors, or your most dangerous detractors.

Employees are the crucial conduit between an organisation and all its different stakeholders. They are the vital face, spirit and voice of the organisation. They hold an organisation's reputation in their hands – each and every day.

Reputations are built through osmosis – people building their own, personal collection of impacts, ideas, images and experiences – real and perceived. Your reputation is what people say about you when you're out of the room – and who is most likely to be talking about you? Your employees.



Employees as the voice of authenticity

Employees are widely regarded as being the most likely to give you an honest and unbiased opinion about an organisation – way out ahead of the management team, the media and advertising.

And yet, in terms of who might be the most compelling advocates, we see a different picture. Yes, the employee is very compelling, but so too is the management team, according to opinion leaders.

	<i>Most honest and least biased</i>	<i>Most compelling advocate and voice</i>
<i>The organisation's employees</i>	69%	73%
<i>The media</i>	40%	33%
<i>An organisation's management</i>	29%	66%
<i>Advertising on behalf of the organisation</i>	8%	15%

This demonstrates the hierarchy of influence. Influence is not about power, it is about an ability to connect at an individual level in a relevant, accessible and appropriate way. It is about identifying people within your own networks who you find compelling and persuasive, who are good communicators and who are people you chose to trust and engage with.



That is why opinion leaders often find management teams compelling and persuasive, as well as the employee. They are identifying with them because they are in the same networks and have a great deal in common. In that context they are powerful ambassadors and advocates but, to wider audiences, outside of their own social networks, they are probably much less persuasive than their employees.

It is our contention that there are social influencers in all walks of life. Within their own communities and peer groups these are the people who are charismatic, communicative and compelling. They exist throughout every organisation at every level and they are the people that it is crucial to engage with effectively. They are the people who will shape your reputation most powerfully.

Understanding how influence works

Influence is changing. We are no longer deferential, we are savvy, actively deconstructing and decoding messages, looking for the real, and often hidden, agenda. We now look to people we know who know (or so we believe) the truth and quiz them to arrive at our own point of view.

Employees are thought to be the voice of authenticity, with no particular axe to grind, but with real 'inside' knowledge about how the organisation really truly behaves. If an employee's opinion is at odds with what I am being told, then I will tend to believe the employee.

This is perhaps best illustrated by what we describe as the 'I've been lucky' syndrome. This is particularly apparent in the public sector where, in spite of improving performance measures, the public perception continues to be one of declining service delivery.

Whilst personal interactions with an organisation are hugely important in defining perceptions and levels of confidence, if they are at odds with what other people are saying, particularly if they work there, then there is a tendency to believe that the good experience is a chance happening – that 'I've been lucky' to have received good, timely service.

Again, this illustrates the very real power and importance of the employee's views, motivation and advocacy.

Moving forwards

Successful organisations of the future will put employees at the heart of their business planning and communications. They will recognise that it is their employees who connect with every other stakeholder, shaping and informing their beliefs and behaviours. They will feel comfortable with employees being the voice of authenticity.

Organisations have a choice between a cycle of discontent and a spiral of improving motivation and connection. Patronise and ignore your employees and your business enters into a vicious downward cycle. Frustrated employees result in disgruntled customers, which lead to employees getting even more frustrated. Conversely, connect and involve employees, listening actively, engaging in



conversation and inviting them to become partners in your future and you will begin to see very different results.

Large organisations clearly have something to learn from smaller ones. Large organisations are thought to be more likely to see their employees as a resource, whereas small organisations are more likely to see them as people.

Leaders of large organisations primarily see their employees as ...

	<i>Large organisations</i>	<i>Small organisations</i>
<i>Resource</i>	45%	23%
<i>Assets</i>	24%	27%
<i>Cost</i>	15%	7%
<i>People</i>	7%	31%
<i>Advocates</i>	1%	3%

One of the clues for success lies in how an organisation structures its internal engagement processes. Establishing units that behave like small organisations, that work as teams, respecting each other as individuals will help to tackle some of the feelings of isolation and disconnection so often found within large bureaucratic organisations.



Trusted allies or dangerous subversives

At Opinion Leader Research we don't believe – in spite of what the media says – that people trust less, rather, people trust differently. We no longer automatically trust the voice of authority, preferring to trust people we know, or believe we know, and people who we think know. For example, the public are more likely to believe Richard and Judy on the vexed subject of MMR than they are the Chief Medical Officer or The Secretary of State for Health.

The changing way in which trust operates in society means that 'people we know' are the new influencers. Instead of trusting conventional authority or communications, we turn to others in our networks for advice, opinions and attitudes.

There is clearly a real opportunity for those leaders that understand influence within their own organisation and find ways of connecting with the individuals that are most influential. Engaging the 'social opinion leaders' within the organisation in a real conversation, actively listening, deliberating and responding will have a significant impact.

These internal 'social opinion leaders' are the hidden persuaders within each organisation. They shape a company's culture, and are vital to its future success and prosperity. They may not be powerful in hierarchical terms, but they are the ones who lead opinion around the water cooler.

The implication for companies is that their employees now play a major role in shaping reputation, both within and outside the organisation.

The future for internal communications lies in understanding influence, identifying who are the influencers and engaging them effectively.



The art of conversation

Opinion leaders recognise that there is a need for real change in how leaders engage with their employees.

There is a strong belief that the language around internal communications has become tired and clichéd, that, all too often, it is spin and hot air. There is also real recognition of the need for organisational leaders to learn how to listen to their employees and to find ways of engaging in a real conversation.

Leaders still need to learn how to listen to their employees	92%
Organisations cannot just impose their vision and values from on high	90%
The language around internal communications has become tired and clichéd	80%
Too much internal communication is spin and hot air	59%

The cascade systems that exist in so many organisations imply one way transmission of information ... that undoubtedly has changed slightly at each telling ... that does little to engage employees in a conversation, involving them in helping to shape, define and take responsibility for the future.

At Opinion Leader Research we have been developing a number of new methods for engaging people in ways that are informed, constructive and considered. We have recently pioneered the collaborative conversation, an approach for developing policy and strategy that meets the needs of both employer and employee and other stakeholders including, for example, customers, resulting in better informed decisions and more motivated employees.

About Opinion Leader Research

Understanding influence, anticipating the future, and involving people in decision-making lie at the heart of what we do.

We specialise in understanding an organisation's reputation and the drivers of that reputation, through engaging with the audiences that matter - elite opinion leaders through to the protagonists that drive and change opinions in their own peer groups.

We have developed pioneering thinking on how influence and communications work in society, and work with organisations to meet the growing demand for involvement and interaction.

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