

# Effective employee communication: The benefits of best practices

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Employers spend millions of dollars to offer a benefit and sometimes a surprisingly small amount to ensure that employees understand and appreciate it. Communications—what you say, how you say it, when you say it, who you say it to—can make a world of difference in how employees or members feel and think about their benefits, workplace, and employer.

## **When effective employee communication matters**

**Communicating difficult or sensitive changes** - Clients often seek out the experience and expertise of Milliman's growing communication consulting team when they are making difficult decisions that result in a negative impact (for example, benefits reduction) or that present additional challenges for employees (such as a new tool or system). We help employers explain why they are making changes—without obscuring the truth.

**Sharing good news** - Effective communication matters even when an employer is improving its benefits package. One client—without our help—introduced an improvement to their benefits plan. Years later, many employees still think negatively about the change because the communication wasn't clear. Good communication is especially important when there's a lack of trust—in such an environment, employees are more likely to create their own version of what happened.

**When nothing changes** - Sometimes a client will change medical carriers and the employer wants to say they are not changing the benefits. But different carriers administer plans differently with real-world consequences for employees. We know the questions to ask and can help employers figure out all the smaller but important changes that may affect their employees, or, if those details are unknown, advise them on how to best communicate with employees that there may be some differences between the two plans.

In addition, what may seem like a minor change to an employer can be perceived as a major change by the employee. For instance, when you're converting a vacation/sick leave program to a PTO program, it's important to communicate all transition details. Is it clear what's happening with the sick bank an employee has saved up? In such a situation, it's best to create a personalized piece: Here's what you have and where it goes.

**Influencing behavior** - Motivating employees to act (or not act) can be one of the most challenging tasks for an employer. For instance, how do you motivate someone to do something they already know they should do—like eat right and exercise?

In focus groups conducted for a client, we learned that the biggest motivating factor to getting and staying healthy for this particular group was that employees wanted to be around for their family, to see their grandkids grow up. This insight guided the team in positioning and communicating the employer's wellness program. Once you understand what motivates employees, it's easier to change their actions.

**Announcing significant changes beyond benefits** - Whenever an organization is undergoing change of any kind, the effectiveness of communication can greatly influence how the change is perceived by employees and how quickly they adapt to the new normal. While a good portion of Milliman's communication work is in the benefits arena, we also help organizations develop an appropriate strategy and implement communication campaigns during a major change, such as mergers and acquisitions, or when trying to get key stakeholders to use a new system.

## **Conducting employee research means really listening to employees**

We enjoy conducting employee research, which can help inform business strategy, policies, practices, and operations. Last year, we worked with a local company that's a supplier to the aerospace industry. This company had doubled its workforce in just a few years, creating a culture clash between older and newer employees. We designed an employee survey, and because the company was seriously committed to hearing what employees had to say, the survey was conducted onsite during working hours. This led to an 88.5% response rate, far above what's typical. The survey was conducted by us to maintain strict objectivity and confidentiality. The results showed leadership exactly what the core issues were. Armed with this knowledge, they were able to define a targeted action plan that addressed both the company's and employees' needs.

## **Measuring success**

Goals and metrics should sync with the client's business objectives. When we do a new project, we sit down with the employer to find out what they're trying to achieve. For instance, they may want to ensure that five percent of employees enroll in a new high deductible plan. Or they may want to reduce call volume to the HR department. Once the objectives are clear, we can assign specific measures that need to be tracked to evaluate the success at the end of the campaign.

Different types of communication call for different success measures. "With benefit changes, you should track participant calls to the call center. If people are confused, you'll hear about it. With wellness programs, you'll need to track benefit claims, absenteeism, and participation in wellness challenges. Questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, face-to-face interviews all can be used to assess if and how well messages were received and understood.

## **Multiple channels, different messages**

An employee communication strategy may include a wide variety of media, including print publications, email and online newsletters, websites, how-to videos, total compensation reports, plan descriptions, posters displayed in the workplace, and in-person meetings. The content and delivery channels used will depend on the stakeholders' needs. How much do they know about what's going on? Do they have influence over the target audience? What is their role and what are their responsibilities in the process? Are they supportive or resistant to what's happening? These aspects are teased out by a discussion and drive the ultimate strategy.

Keeping up with technology and electronic media adds an additional challenge. Websites, blogs, intranets, SharePoint, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn...it's overwhelming and hard for employers to stay up to date. Clients know they can't just ignore these new channels, because people of all ages are using them extensively in their personal lives, but deciding how and what to integrate into the workplace can be a challenge. At the same time, traditional media typically continue to play some kind of role. People absorb information differently and key messages are more effective when reiterated in multiple ways across a variety of media.

## **Five best practices**

1. *Plan before you launch.* Before you get started, define objectives, identify key stakeholders, and create a strategy and plan of action.
2. *Don't sugarcoat bad news.* Employees see through and resent attempts at hiding benefit changes that can be perceived negatively.
3. *Stick to your message.* Determine key messages at the beginning and communicate them consistently.
4. *Make sure the managers and supervisors are on board.* This is an underestimated group—they have influence over employees and can be advocates or barriers depending on how you treat them.
5. *Rinse and repeat.* Reinforce key messages multiple times and across a variety of media in a coordinated way to avoid overwhelming the intended audience. People are affected differently by different formats and messages need time to sink in.