

‘Pompous,’ ‘sterile’ communications

Candid comments from BBC’s former head of HR highlight employee communication challenges

BY SARAH DOBSON

THEY ARE comments not often heard, at least publicly, from the head of HR. But the BBC’s former head of human resources, Lucy Adams, caused a stir recently when she admitted she was not happy with the employee communications while working at England’s publicly funded broadcaster.

Adams left the broadcaster in March and made the comments at a conference in July.

The BBC had been going through tough times after the Jimmy Savile scandal — a deceased BBC radio DJ and TV personality who is alleged to have sexually abused hundreds of victims — and controversial severance payments to departing executives.

BBC bosses lost the trust of employees by talking like lawyers, lacking courage and demanding “petty privileges,” she said.

One employee told Adams her group emails were “crap” and she should get someone else to write them, according to the *Times*.

“I was slightly taken aback, as this was precisely what I had done,” said Adams. “My emails were usually written with several other people — people in HR, people in legal, people in the press team and people in internal communications.”

“As I reread the most recent communications, I realized with dismay that he was right. My emails were crap,” she said.

“They seemed pompous and sterile, lacking any humanity or humility. I had adopted the royal executive ‘we’ and, in an effort to be accurate, I had ‘lawyered out’ any personality.”

Adams said she became afraid to send out corporate announcements for fear of the reaction, according to the *Times*.

“I always hesitated before pressing ‘send,’ knowing that their arrival in 20,000 inboxes would spark a deluge of angry responses,” she said, adding management was so distrusted that employees saw her communications as part of a more “sinister hidden agenda.”

Transparency key

If corporate communications are not appreciated by employees, things can go south very quickly. If information is not shared or is guarded, workers will start talking to each other — and customers, according to Melanie Peacock, associate professor at the Bissett School of Business at Mount Royal University in Calgary.

The key is for human resources to be transparent, even when details aren’t available, and that includes providing timelines and getting back to people by those deadlines.

“We struggle, while being professional, to still show the humanity, for lack of a better word, or emotion,” she said, adding it’s important to be genuine and find a balance.

It’s about transparency and winning back the trust of employees, said Sarah McEvoy, senior account director at public relations firm Edelman in Toronto.

“Your communications have to be honest, they have to be really straightforward, using that plain, accessible language so that people feel like they’re part of the conversation,” she said.

“CEOs, CHROs, all senior execs need to be pretty honest with themselves and take a step back, step out of all the corporate jargon and say, ‘How would I want to receive this news?’ and be honest with themselves and be honest with

their teams and really take a long, hard look at it.”

If a company’s in a crisis and the internal communications are weak, employees will start questioning why they should stay, said McEvoy.

But if the employer can talk to those employees about how it’s encountering a tough time and how it’s dealing with that, it makes the workers part of the process.

“If you don’t let employees talk about it at work, they’re going to talk about it anyway — you’re just not going to be part of the conversation,” she said.

“Engage them as much as you can... If you can get that ‘We’re all in this it together’ feeling then instead of breaking apart, you band together and make it through.”

Employers can be lacking when it comes to making internal communications a priority, said McEvoy.

“Companies have often a very effective external communications strategy, they know how to deal with their stakeholders, their shareholders, if they’re going to issue a news release — that’s a big focus for them, whatever corporate announcements they’re making — and they don’t often think about employees or employees are sort of a secondary thought.

“So what we say is... make them central to your external communications too. If you’re making a big announcement, let employees know first.”

But sometimes the HR department isn’t involved in the process when it should be, so a CEO or another executive sends out a message that should have first been vetted from an HR perspective, said Peacock.

“As HR professionals, it’s our

obligation to make sure that long before we’re needed, we’ve established ourselves as credible communicators and people that can coach and assist.”

HR can certainly add a great deal to the communications because it has its finger on the pulse of the organization, the culture, and it knows that certain employee groups may need different messaging than others, she said.

But HR also needs to recognize it’s not made up of professional communicators, so it may also need outside help to craft the message, said Peacock.

Newer trends in communications

A lot of employee communications is moving away from HR to an internal team designated for that particular task, according to McEvoy.

Employers are also being encouraged to move to more of an employee news model and look at how employees want to receive their information, how they get information in their day-to-day lives and how to make that information more interesting, she said.

“Our advice is (to move) away from that top-down HR communications and be more with the employees, employee-to-employee style, less formal and trying to just keep them in the loop, not just about HR policies but about everything that’s going on in the company.

“And you can weave in the HR messages and the HR policy into that in a more compelling way,” she said. “It’s far less a top-down approach now — it’s more a peer-to-peer approach.”

If there’s a way for employees to

provide feedback, that also makes sense. They can then provide suggestions or express how they're feeling and what would help them feel better about their job and supporting senior leadership, said McEvoy.

Two-way communication can certainly help with any concerns around condescending or insincere messages, said Patricia McQuillan, president of Brand Matters in Toronto.

One employer, for example, was managing a time-sensitive acquisition that needed to be communicated to all staff, so it allowed employees to feed in their questions electronically to better manage the announcement.

"(This) just helped reduce the fear and we did it in a way that helped them remain anonymous... and we had management in the room help-

ing with the communication, and it was like a live broadcast via web, it was like a webcast, with an interactive feed," she said.

While logistically challenging, town halls can also be very effective for communications, said McQuillan.

"(Employees) always love town halls — that's their opportunity to talk with the CEO or the leaders."

The top issue for employees is management not walking the talk — it's as simple as that, she said, and the internal brand is important. It's about threading an employer's mission, vision and values throughout the communications, from the phrases to the style and tone.

"Any organization should be thinking of their employees also as their customers," said McQuillan.