

Using effective communications

Using effective communications to create direction

Introduction

UNISON is the trade union that represents workers in the public sector. It has 1.3 million members and is Britain's biggest trade union. Public sector workers are those that work in public services and utilities such as local authorities, health, education, the police and power companies. Good communication is at the heart of the efficiency of any organisation and a trade union is no exception. It is therefore vital that those in the business continually assess the efficiency of their communications.

One model of communication is the Shannon-Weaver model. This follows the journey of a message from sender to receiver. The message is put into a particular form, such as written or visual. A medium is then chosen, say a letter, email or poster. Once received, the message has to be decoded. The whole process can be clouded by what is known as 'noise'. Poorly chosen language, the wrong medium or an unclear message all count as noise.

Internal and external communication

Communication within an organisation is internal. From the organisation to outside bodies it is external. UNISON communicates internally through:

- * project groups, meetings and briefings
- * posters and publications such as its in-house magazine, *InsideOut*
- * the intranet and email. Much of its external communication is carried out via its website. Printed media is also used, as is new technology such as DVDs. For example, one DVD is called '10 good reasons to join UNISON' and is used by branches to help in recruitment.

Formal and informal communications

Formal communications take place within set channels and follow set lines. For example, changes in policy follow a formal process from members upwards. Informal communications refer to the networks in organisations that do not have set rules. Informal routes can often be more powerful and effective than formal ones.

Benefits

Everyone in the country is touched by public services. If an issue or dispute arises, good communications can help to solve it. It helps the groups involved to understand each other and so lead to a resolution. UNISON uses various means of communication to help problems and disputes to become more visible. For example, it recently ran an NHS day of action in order to influence government policy. This used the media, the website, members to lobby MPs, public meetings and all sorts of promotional items. As a result, it received a lot of publicity.

Overcoming barriers

Barriers to communication can weaken its effectiveness. Some members of UNISON may not have access to a computer or may not have English as a first language. The union creates, at local branch level, the means for everyone to access messages. Lone workers may also be hard to contact. These are people, like lock-keepers on a canal, who work alone. To counter this, UNISON targets some messages at individuals.

Conclusion

UNISON is able to sort out issues and disputes and control campaigns thanks to good communication. This also helps policies put forward by members to be discussed and adopted at the Annual Conference. Good communication helps to make UNISON effective.