

CIPR North East Pride Awards

Category Internal Communications Campaign

Entry: Nexus Moving Forward



Summary

Nexus improved employee engagement despite a challenging period of restructuring, spending cuts and uncertainty about the organisations' future.

The Communications Team has transformed internal communications, empowering managers to lead through the line and opening two-way channels between staff and Directors.

Brief and Objectives

The Nexus executive asked the Head of Communications to overhaul internal communications in summer 2011 due to:

- Disappointing results in the national 'Best Places to Work' survey, showing the business lagging behind public sector comparators.
- Challenging short-term prospects, with an on-going pay freeze, spending cuts and two rounds of restructuring likely to reduce the 720 workforce by 20%.
- Uncertainty about the longer-term due to local Government reform.

An engaged workforce would be crucial to delivering the most ambitious programme in Nexus history, including a 500% increase in Metro capital projects, the roll-out of smart travel with complicated new customer service and IT processes, and a politically-sensitive workstream to reform the local bus market.

Research, planning, strategy and tactics

The Communications team worked with HR colleagues to analyse quantitative and qualitative survey data and use focus groups to understand barriers to effective engagement. This identified staff and managers confused or lacking awareness about the organisation's plans and feeling detached from decision-making.

We also looked at research on successful internal communications elsewhere, before presenting the draft 'Moving Forward' strategy to Directors. The guiding principles were:

- 1) Empower line managers to communicate Nexus' immediate and strategic goals and performance towards them, based on research that they were people's most trusted source.
- 2) Increase personal engagement between the Directors and the workforce as a whole, in environments where staff felt comfortable.
- 3) Revamp materials and processes to complement new activities and foster two-way communications.

The strategy reflected Nexus as a diverse business including main offices, disparate frontline customer service and shift-based engineering labour rarely accessing computers at work.

Central to Moving Forward was a repeated four-weekly cycle of:

- Core Briefing: A new cascade briefing passing through Nexus, led by line managers at each level as a means to start conversations about the wider business. Directors briefed section heads, who briefed supervisory staff etc., using a single A4 sheet summary, with space for departmental information and feedback to be added. Training highlighted the importance of using the Brief as a prompt, not a handout (managers were refused digital formats!). The Brief served to re-introduce regular team meetings where they had stopped.
- Nexus Times – An A3-folded newsletter mixing gossip with corporate information. This long-standing format went from weekly to fortnightly, issued a week before or after Core Briefing. This improved quality control and solved the problem of staff ‘missing’ whole issues due to shift patterns or holidays.
- Bernard’s Briefing – a four-weekly personal letter from the Chief Executive, by email or notice board, reflecting on recent issues.
New supporting processes included:
 - An Employee Engagement Working Group led by the Director of Finance in autumn 2011 identified quick wins and key themes to address.
 - An annual Moving Forward event held externally supported by a brochure summarising the year’s plans, followed by an update six months later. Q&A sessions with Directors were mixed with presentations.
 - A refresh of the annual Staff Awards, reviewing categories and format to increase interest and nominations.
 - Safety Tours for senior managers to visit frontline operational environments 24 to talk with staff about their work.
 - Changes to a planned training programme for 60 supervisors to include practical business improvement projects, with groups presenting to senior managers and agreeing action plans.
 - A revitalised Corporate Induction programme based on our prize asset the Shields Ferry.
 - Better highlighting of personal development opportunities and workplace benefits across channels.
 - A new programme of inclusive CSR including cake sales, raffles and charity activities.

Implementation

The programme was tested with managers and launched in autumn 2011, with the ‘2012’ staff survey conducted at that time used to benchmark progress. Regular reviews since then have led to changes including:

- 1) Section heads welcomed Core Briefing meetings with Directors, so an additional monthly meeting was added in 2012 where they could present and discuss projects in more detail.
- 2) Staff didn’t feel ‘safety tours’ were true engagement opportunities, being process-based. New monthly ‘Breakfast Breakouts’ were introduced from 2014, with 30 staff chatting to Directors at a Newcastle café.
- 3) The Core Briefing was revamped in 2014 to include topical graphics.

Measurement and evaluation

The 2014 Best Places results (survey taken October 2013) showed improved engagement across seven of eight key areas, with the last matching 2012. This upward trend contrasted with comparators, which saw average decline.

In detail, those rating themselves 'mildly' to 'strongly' positive about:

- Leadership rose 11 points since 2012, to 37%.
- My company rose 7 points to 67%.
- My manager rose 6 points to 54%.
- Personal growth opportunities rose 8 points to 54%.
- My team rose 6 points to 64%.
- Getting a fair deal at work rose 12 points to 49%
- The company giving something back rose 14 points to 46%

Internal research in 2012 showed that within a year the Core Briefing was rivalling the established Nexus Times as a prime source of information, recognised as such by 25% of staff.

Staff Award nominations more than doubled from 80 in spring 2011 to above 200 in 2013, remaining high at 135 in 2014.

Engagement has driven numerous quick-win and strategic improvements, including investment in new tools for rail workers, reform of staff appraisals, simplification of intranet document stores, new corporate lanyards, increased internal marketing for Metro's safety 'Rule Book' and more...

Budget and cost-effectiveness

The major investment has been senior management time - an additional commitment of about 172 hours annually between three Directors which they continue to be happy to give, based on positive outcomes described above.

The staff awards has since 2013 become self-financing, with room hire at The Sage Gateshead, dinner, compere and drinks etc. funded through sponsorship. Breakfast Breakouts cost an additional £2,000 per year for food and room.

The remaining programme is funded from an annual budget of £19,408; this has come down from £34,000 since 2011 due to the awards breaking even and Nexus Times being produced less frequently.