How can you facilitate and encourage **dialogue** with employees?

The trend is clear: communication technologies will lead companies to move towards a more sustained dialogue with their employees. Not only do employers have a lot to gain from this trend, as they can capitalize more fully on the intelligence and knowledge of the entire organization, reinforce employee involvement, and enhance responsiveness by staying in closer touch with the field, but citizens are also increasingly accustomed to being able to express themselves and share their ideas freely. In this context, firms which attempt to retain traditional top-down or purely hierarchical communication practices will likely lose their credibility in the talent market, and ultimately in the market as a whole. So, it is no surprise that more and more companies are deploying their own social networks, even if some are motivated principally by the fear of falling behind the times.

Yet, technology alone cannot do it all—far from it! The disappointing outcome of many 2.0 projects is proof enough—"communities" that never really get off the ground, more or less empty discussion forums, ignored invitations to voice opinions, etc. Starting from observations of many such initiatives, the authors we have analyzed stress the importance of defining a true strategy of dialogue with employees, founded above all on an authentic desire to listen. Otherwise, the simple act of giving employees the means to express themselves may well be ineffective, as many do not feel particularly at ease with taking part in dialogue in their professional lives. Three obstacles in particular tend to hinder their involvement:

Collaborative tools are not enough to generate productive dialogue.

Am I legitimate?

In times past, employees recognized that knowledge was basically held by their hierarchical superiors, who were better informed and possessed a broader perspective, or by duly recognized experts. Traditionally, employees did not express their views unless explicitly asked to do so. Even if the younger generations often start with the assumption that it is natural for everyone to express themselves, their enthusiasm may be quickly dampened by the attitude of their colleagues or superiors. Surmounting this reticence requires creating a framework in which everyone feels certain that their contribution will be valued.

Why expose myself?

People inevitably take risks when they voice their opinions and ideas; some might not like what they say; they may appear poorly informed; they may be mocked or ridiculed; they may no longer be seen as a team player, etc. Many thus prefer to remain silent, just in case. A reassuring context is thus required to stimulate open dialogue.

Don't I have better things to do?

Finally, motivation is a major hurdle: why spend time and energy sharing your views, and participating in discussions which are not directly linked to the advancement of your work? Giving employees the tools to safely express themselves is thus insufficient; they must also be given good reasons to make the effort.

Five conditions are critical to facilitate and encourage dialogue with all employees.

1. Create a **real bond** with employees
2. Play the **transparency** card
3. Target the **right channels**
4. Promote a **participative** culture
5. Involve employees in **making decisions**

Foster a sense of proximity

- **Organize meetings in small groups around a senior executive** to enable direct dialogue unfiltered by the hierarchy.
- **Organize meetings outside the hierarchy**, because people must feel close to all company leaders, not just those who lead their department or division.
- **Stimulate informal conversations**, by circulating in offices, reorganizing the workspace, and provoking meetings at times favorable to informal chats (cafeteria, coffee breaks, end of the day, evenings, etc.).
- **Keep a blog**. This will help to make communication more personal and allow for reactions, thus stimulating discussion. Beware, however, of the time required, because you can't subcontract this job if you want to forge bonds of trust!

1st condition
Create a **real bond** with employees

A certain degree of proximity is required to want to begin in a dialogue. Indeed, it is rare for people to engage in sincere and open conversation with somebody they hardly know. It is thus useful to take time **to establish a bond between the leaders and the rest of the organization**. The CEO of Favi, a very profitable French automobile supplier with 400 employees, did just that. The authors of *Freedom, Inc.* tell how the CEO took advantage of the transitional period with his predecessor to "tour around" during his first four months in the job to meet all of the company's employees. He was then able to build on these foundations to instill highly participative and particularly efficient operating practices.

> Knowing your counterpart is often an essential prerequisite to engaging in sincere dialogue.

Executives do not always have the luxury of meeting with every employee, particularly in large organizations. But there are many ways to **reduce the distance between executives and employees**. General Motors, for instance, organizes regular "diagonal meetings," of a senior manager and six to fifteen people at different hierarchical levels from various departments, to exchange ideas and become better acquainted. Nora Densel, in charge of marketing at Intuit, keeps a blog which she updates every week. Her postings regularly generate comments, and sometimes controversy, fostering a climate of authentic and open conversation. John Chambers, the CEO of Cisco, keeps a blog in which he expresses himself through short videos recorded on his computer. The naturalness of the recording and the personal touch of the video format help establish a sense of proximity.

Dare transparency

How can you get employees to contribute openly and sincerely?

- **Set the example.** Raise the real issues yourself. Immediately disseminate information important to the life of the company.
- **Create multiple channels to facilitate communication.** Offer people a chance to express themselves in a framework they find convenient, e.g., in a structured discussion, by launching informal chats, by creating a channel to "ask the CEO a question," through an anonymous question box, etc.
- **Demonstrate your willingness to listen.** Greet all contributions with visible interest and benevolence, so long as they do not breach the elementary rules of interpersonal respect and cordiality.

2nd condition
Play the **transparency** card

To be willing to take part in open discussion, people must feel confident and reassured. Yet, after years of listening to messages communicated by senior management without consulting them, **employees are naturally reserved and cautious about expressing themselves**. Overcoming this reluctance requires **clearly demonstrating the desire of top management to listen and display transparency**. For example, at a seminar to launch a managerial community gateway, the HR director of a pet food company asked everyone to share their reactions via electronic tablet. Their anonymous comments were then displayed directly on the screen for all to see, without prior moderation. More powerfully than any speech could have done, this approach communicated the sincere desire of the company to listen to what employees had to say. Similarly, when Anne Mulcahy took the helm at Xerox when the company was in the throes of a crisis, she set the tone by raising questions at seminars which employees did not dare ask—an effective way to show that she expected people to tackle the real problems openly.

> To take part, employees must feel that they can express themselves openly without risk.

The issue of transparency is raised whenever an online discussion forum is launched. For instance, when EMC, a cloud computing leader, prepared to launch its social network, a sharp debate ensued: Was it really possible to let people express themselves publicly, without filtering? Experience showed that self-moderation naturally took place, because excessive or disrespectful remarks immediately raised comments and reactions by colleagues clamoring for greater objectivity and respect.

3rd condition
Target the **right channels**

To intensify participative communication by employees and dialogue with top management, the reflex is often to create new channels, particularly by turning to new technologies. However, the risk is then to focus more on the number and diversity of channels than on **clarifying their reason for existing**. Following a 2008 audit by General Motors, for example, the company decided to significantly reduce the number of channels and the frequency of updates. The initial intention was to offer a great wealth of information and facilitate access through the channel most convenient for each individual, but this caused a great deal of overlap, confusion and saturation. Simplifying the system greatly improved its impact. Likewise, **the objective is not so much to create new channels as to set the stage for productive discussion**. The authors of *Talk, Inc.* cite the example of a blog by the CEO of a large British corporation, which was in fact limited to a regular flow of information with no real impact. This changed when he decided to use it as a discussion driver, by clearly soliciting opinions on concrete, burning issues: the number of comments quickly soared from two per entry to several hundred!

> People must be able to clearly identify the options available to find information or express their ideas.

Generally speaking, the experts recommend that companies **define a true organizational strategy for dialogue, and use this as the basis to decide on the most appropriate means to carry out this strategy**. General Motors, for example, combined several approaches to facilitate dialogue between employees and executives: the aforementioned "diagonal meetings" to create proximity; targeted opportunities for listening in the form of online chats focused on a question posed by an executive to a diverse group of employees, e.g.: "How can we reinforce quality?" etc. In 2009, AT&T felt the need for greater interaction between senior executives and its 600 senior managers. The telephone services supplier replaced the traditional three-day seminar in Dallas with a quarterly half-day discussion, held locally in a dozen cities. These meetings combine videoconferences with corporate executives and discussions with local senior executives and leaders. This hybrid online and face-to-face approach reconciles a high level of interactivity with the efficiency required to realistically maintain a quarterly pace.

Examples

- **Draw closer to the field**
  In 2007, the Bank of America launched an online discussion forum for its retail bank employees to enable executives to interact with people in the field. From these open forums, in which everyone could participate, executives obtained an unprecedented flow of extremely valuable feedback.
- **Post-merger integration**
  En 2010, the employees of a division of Intuit went through a large-scale merger. To manage their concerns, they were given an email address to submit questions. Executives then answered these questions via many short videos which could then be viewed by the entire organization on the company intranet. These videos gave people the opportunity to hear senior managers speaking directly about the points of greatest interest to them. The video format also made it easier to manage emotions by maximizing the sense of proximity—extremely precious in a time of great upheaval.

Which tools for which needs?

There is a vast range of options to facilitate a dialogue dynamic between executives and employees. Before trying to establish a new channel, it is best to clarify your top-priority objectives and identify existing or potential tools. This is a good way to target the approach and avoid generating confusion for employees by offering too many different initiatives.
The chart below shows a range of possible options to support the various components of dialogue.

DIRECT EXPRESSION	LISTENING	Q&A	JOINT CONSTRUCTION
To elicit sincere conversations, it is important to minimize distance by addressing people directly and personally.	Understanding the concerns and views of employees is a valuable means to stay in touch with realities in the field.	In addition to listening to expressed viewpoints, it can be a good idea to facilitate feedback on sensitive questions.	In addition to questions and answers, opportunities for deeper discussion may be necessary.
Some possible options: Small meetings, videoconferences, blogs written in the first person, personal blogs for speaking in video format.	**Some possible options:** Online chats focused on a question posed to employees, online free discussion forums or communities.	**Some possible options:** Anonymous question box, specific space to "ask the CEO a question."	**Some possible options:** Small meetings, participative seminars, structured online discussion.

4th condition
Promote a **participative** culture

Recognize contributions

Employees will more willingly participate in dialogue if they know their contributions are useful and valued:

- Remember **to thank and recognize people publicly** for their contributions. E.g.: Via an email communiqué or the company intranet, for example.
- **Explain why the contributions are beneficial.** E.g.: "We hope to use this input to more effectively define the major strategic issues of the future."
- **Emphasize concrete results.** E.g.: Post the end results on the company intranet or bulletin boards: Launching of a new product, a new slogan, etc.

The more employees feel comfortable about expressing themselves, the more they naturally participate in discussions and the richer and more varied their contributions. One way to encourage this mindset is to **regularly ask for the views of employees on various topics.** Google, for example, surveys its employees almost weekly on many different subjects, such as their perception of the market. EMC regularly asks the entire organization for input in domains which most companies would leave up to the experts, e.g., to participate in the *"Great Place to Work"* ranking, publish a collection of testimonials on how to reconcile work and family time, etc.

> Dialogue will be richer if people are comfortable participating.

In parallel, it is critical to **show that this input is actually being put to good use.** Following an in-house photography competition on the life of the company, General Electric used many of the award-winning photographs for official communication purposes in the annual report, press releases, etc., much to the pride of the contributors. At EMC, the team in charge of a cost-cutting project studied the many ideas posed in an employee-initiated forum. The implementation of many of these ideas was then specifically communicated.

5th condition
Involve employees in **making decisions**

Communicate

Employees are more willing to participate when they understand why and how their contributions are used. This requires communicating abundantly about the strategy:

- **Organize regular updates** to enable employees to ask questions about the strategy.
- **Explain how individual initiatives support the strategy,** using concrete examples.
- **Communicate the strategy with a story:** a narrative description of where the company is coming from, what drives it, etc. is much more compelling than a simple enumeration.

The dialogue between management and employees will be all the richer if it relates to fundamental issues with significant repercussions for the company or the people who work there. Indeed, **people are more motivated to contribute when they clearly perceive that their opinion counts**. Castorama, a French subsidiary of the Kingfisher distribution group, got 75 percent of employees to participate in online discussions concerning new uniform design, with an outcome which was highly satisfactory to those concerned. At Brico Dépôt Spain, another Kingfisher unit, profits are successfully tracked in a participative manner. Each store has a cross-functional team responsible for facilitating a monthly meeting with all staff. Everyone is highly motivated because margin improvements are directly reflected in their individual bonuses each quarter. **Discussing strategy is also one of the best ways to obtain buy-in.** Infosys, an IT services leader, asked all of its employees to share their forecasts concerning major upcoming market trends. After compiling the results, online chats were held to discuss how best to address these trends. This initiative helped people not only to understand but also to take ownership of the resulting strategic choices.

> Employees will be all the more motivated if they are allowed to participate in important decisions.

Three areas to get employees involved

NEW DEVELOPMENTS	STRATEGIC DECISIONS	COMMUNICATION
Give employees a chance to imagine new development opportunities for the company. E.g.: Google gives developers a mandate and resources to test their own innovation ideas.	Consult employees on certain strategic decisions. E.g.: Hewlett-Packard regularly conducts online surveys to gather opinions from all employees to support marketing and strategic decisions.	Allow employees participating in company communication efforts. E.g.: Coca-Cola created a complete brand communication support system for employees (information flow, training, ambassador network, etc.).