

How can leadership effectively engage and communicate with employees?

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Issue/Challenges

USGS is a large (7000+ person) organization. Our people are widely dispersed, based in over 200 different locations across every part of the U.S., and some international locations. Our folks report through a variety of different chains of command that vary in length and complexity. We have people working in a myriad of job types. Employees are (rightly) focused primarily on doing their specific jobs, all of which contribute to the overall mission. Yet individual jobs are often very narrowly focused; even people with national-level roles often are familiar with only a few aspects of the organization. All of these factors work together to make it hard for employees to understand the full breadth and complexity of the USGS, to track organizational issues and drivers, or to understand what is behind problems or opportunities.

Employees should focus on their jobs; that is what they were hired to do. But it is generally helpful -- and sometimes very important -- for an employee to have some degree of broader organizational awareness. This is especially true in times of change when policies and priorities are shifting. It is also helpful when resources (such as budget) are impacted or other stressors are at play. At such times, information about internal and external drivers and forces, opportunities, and how you fit into the organization can help things make more sense, reduce frustrations, and help employees adapt.

But you don't want to inundate employees with too much or tangential information. While important to relay both bad and good news, it is important not to destroy morale. Given the nature of some of the stressors and challenges, communications must avoid creating a major "backlash" from within or outside the USGS.

In recent years, USGS leaders have devoted a lot of energy and taken substantial steps in order to be more effective in communicating with employees. We instituted the USGS NeedToKnow (NTK) weekly email digest, the Leaders Blog, town halls meetings, and informal opportunities to meet leaders. Results from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) and other anecdotal information suggests these efforts have helped, but organizational communication still seems mostly one-way (from leadership out); we need effective communication to leadership as well. Leaders often still hear that "you aren't communicating enough" or "no one is listening"; but do these messages represent a broad spectrum of employees or a small and disengaged subset?

So how do we improve our communications? Locally focused efforts seem popular, but you can't have events like "Breakfast with Bill" everywhere. On top of that, we face very real funding pressures and constraints that may limit some communication options. What role do evolving technology and generation-driven preferences play in communication challenges and opportunities? What should a new

director from outside the USGS know about the bureau, and what methods could he employ in order to effectively communicate with employees?

Background Material/Resources

- Recent NeedToKnow weekly digests
- Metrics on NTK and @theCore
- Recent Leaders Blog posts
- Statistics on the number of blog responses, etc.
- # of Responses that are anonymous.
- Examples from mission areas, regions, or centers of best practices where employees see good communication flow

Expectations

We would like the ALS team to Provide the champions, the class, and the ELT with ideas and perspectives on what we (leadership) can do to communicate and engage with our employees more effectively. Be creative but realistic about resource constraints: more money, more staff, and more time are not a viable answer. Consider what we've so far done, what we haven't done and should do, and perhaps even what we should stop doing. What is possible at the (center/office?) region, mission, and headquarters level?.In particular, how can we enable and encourage "upward" communication"? Provide your insights on why employees "go anonymous" in responding to blogs, even when their feedback is positive; what lesson should we take from that?

Note: this scenario isn't about the broader "employee engagement" topic that includes everything from mentoring, IDPs, job performance, etc. This is about communication exchange in our immediate organization and how information from leadership (and ability to reach leadership) occurs from that position.