Van strategie tot storie

Egpaar leer werkgewers om op prettige manier met werkers te kommunikeer

Vida Booysen

Eendag lank, lank gelede was daar 'n maatskappy waar die bestuur graag met werkers gekommunikeer het deur algemene e-pos aan almal uit te stuur. Daarin het hulle gewigtige woorde soos "visie", "missie," "risikobestuur" of "strategie" gebruik.

Die werkers het nie altyd verstaan waaroor hierdie groot woorde gaan nie, maar hulle wou niemand se gevoelens seermaak nie en buitendien was hierdie terme ver verwyderd van hul daaglikse werklikheid. As hulle praktiese probleme in die werkplek wou oplos, het hulle sommer daar op die fabrieksvloer 'n dinkskrum gehou. Soms sou hulle in die kleedkamer, terwyl hulle skofte ruil, vir mekaar sê wat hulle graag wou verander. Maar niemand het dit vir die base gesê nie, want dit is die verkeerde loopbaanskuif.

Toe, op 'n dag het twee buitestanders, 'n man en 'n vrou, met die mense in die raadsaal en op die fabrieksvloer kom gesels om te help dat almal mekaar beter verstaan, en sáám 'n strategie vir die maatskappy bedink.

Die man was 12 jaar lank uitvoerende hoof van een van die land se mynreuse en sy passie is om die korporatiewe wêreld te omvorm tot 'n plek waar mense na mekaar luister. Sy vrou is 'n kreatiewe warrelwind met 'n passie vir stories skryf. Haar MBA-verhandeling het maniere ondersoek waarop maatskappye net so innoverend en doeltreffend intern kan kommunikeer as wat hulle deur advertensies met die buitewêreld kommunikeer.

Bernard Swanepoel, voormalige hoof van Harmony Gold, en sy vrou, Tracey, se spesialis-konsultantemaatskappy, Thinkspiration, spits hom daarop toe om korporatiewe strategie verstaanbaar te maak, en hulle het al verskeie groot kliënte op hul kerfstok, soos Sasol Mining, Cell C, Careways en natuurlik Harmony, waar "The Harmony Way" 'n manier geword het om mynwerkers in Welkom en fondsbestuurders in New York op dieselfde wyse aan die maatskappy te verbind.

Die Swanepoels omskep korporatiewe strategie in 'n boeiende storie wat met die harte van die werkers praat. "Stories is 'n universele taal wat ons almal praat, dis 'n onlosmaaklike deel van ons menswees en dit vorm die manier waarop ons die wêreld beskou," sê Tracey.

Die stories word in visuele vorm, soos byvoorbeeld 'n strokiesprent of 'n padkaart uitgebeeld. As jy 'n prentjie by die storie sit, gee jy betekenis aan data en inligting en maak jy seker almal verstaan wat jy met die terminologie bedoel, sê sy.

Wanneer Tracey en Bernard oor Thinkspiration praat, vul hulle mekaar se stories aan. Bernard vertel Tracey het altyd vir hom gesê dit lyk asof hy dink terwyl hy praat. "En dan sê ek vir haar: 'Hoe moet ek weet wat ek dink, tensy ek dit sê?' Só het ons agtergekom mense benader gesprekke verskillend omdat hulle elkeen op 'n ander manier dink."

Bernard en Tracey Swanepoel se Thinkspiration omskep korporatiewe strategie in 'n storie wat almal verstaan.

Nog 'n voordeel wanneer jy 'n groep mense bymekaar kan kry om te praat oor 'n onderwerp, is dat die uitkomste soveel kragtiger is as wanneer net een persoon op sy eie agter sy skootrekenaar gaan sit om 'n probleem te deurdink. Thinkspiration kry 'n maatskappy sover om aan 'n gesprek deel te neem wat in elk geval plaasvind.

"As daar iets gebeur wat die maatskappy raak, sal die mense dit in die wandelgange bespreek. Dat topbestuur nie wil hoor wat hulle sê nie, verander nie die feit dat hulle praat nie," sê Bernard.

Maar hulle luister ook vir positiewe terugvoer en probeer die sterk punte bepaal waarmee die organisasie kan werk. "Mense is mal daaroor dat iemand na hul idees luister, en werknemers kom dikwels vorendag met briljante idees, wat 'n mens in die strategie kan inkorporeer."

Tracey sê haar werkondervinding in die advertensiewese het haar geleer om massas inligting te vereenvoudig, te sien wat werklik belangrik is, en dit op 'n kreatiewe wyse te verpak. Sy het begin wonder waarom maatskappye nie net so innoverend met hul interne kommunikasie omgaan nie.

"Maatskappye betaal baie geld aan advertensie-agentskappe om na buite te adverteer, maar op die interne vlak is die wyse waarop die boodskap oorgedra word, 'n eeu agter die tyd."

> "Ons kan nie meer soos in die ou dae ons werknemers dwing om ons visie en waardes te aanvaar, asof ons hulle besit nie.

Die span gebruik graag sport as 'n metafoor vir die uitdagings van die sakewêreld

"Kyk byvoorbeeld na die passievolle ondersteuners by 'n sokkerwedstryd. Hulle is so betrokke by die wedstryd en hul span - elkeen het 'n mening en is nie skaam om dit uit te speek nie. Dis daardie soort betrokkenheid wat 'n mens van werknemers in 'n maatskappy wil hê."

As daar een ding is waaroor die Swanepoels sterk voel, is dit dat die korporatiewe werkplek 'n meer positiewe, hulpvaardiger omgewing moet word.

"Ons kan nie meer soos in die ou dae ons werknemers dwing om ons visie en waardes te aanvaar, asof ons hulle besit nie. Strategiese kommunikasie verg 'n nuwe wedstrydplan om seker te maak almal leef vir ewig en altyd gelukkig saam."

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From Strategy to Story

Couple teaches employers to communicate with their employees in a fun way

By Vida Booysen

Once upon a time, there was a management team who loved communicating with their workers by sending out ALL STAFF emails. In these they used fancy words like “vision,” “mission,” “risk management” and “strategy”.
The workers didn’t always understand what these big, fancy words were about, but they didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, and anyway these terms were far removed from their daily reality. If they wanted to resolve practical problems in the workplace, they simply held brainstorms right there on the factory floor. Sometimes they would chat together in the change house– during shift changeovers - about things that they wanted to change and improve. But no one told the bosses about these discussions…that would have been a severe career-limiting move!

Then, one day, a husband and wife, two outsiders, went to have a conversation with the workers on the shop floor, so that everyone could understand each other better and could come up with a strategy for the company together.
The man (the CEO of one of the country’s mining giants for 12 years) is passionate about reinventing the corporate world as a place where people listen to each other. His wife is a creative whirlwind with a passion for writing stories. Her MBA dissertation investigated ways in which companies could communicate as innovatively and effectively with their employees as advertisers do with consumers.

Bernard Swanepoel, former head of Harmony Gold, and his wife Tracey’s specialist consultancy THINKspiration, aims to help companies get their strategy understood, and they have a variety of big clients to their name: Sasol Mining, Cell C, Careways and of course Harmony, where “The Harmony Way” became a way of successfully engaging mineworkers in Welkom and fund managers in New York. The Swanepoels distill corporate strategy into a compelling story that speaks to the hearts of workers. “Stories are a universal language that we all speak, they are an innate part of our humanity, and they are an integral part of how we see the world,” says Tracey. “These stories are represented visually (in picture form), for example in a cartoon or a roadmap. If you add a picture to a story, you give context and meaning to data and information and you make sure that everyone understands what is meant with (sometimes complex) terminology”, she says.

When Tracey and Bernard talk about THINKspiration they complete each other's stories. Bernard says that Tracey has always told him that when he speaks it's like he is thinking aloud. "And then I tell her: 'How do I know what I think until I have heard what I have to say?' And that's the way we discovered that people approach conversations differently – because each one brings his/her own way of thinking to the conversation."

Yet another advantage when you get a group of people together to talk about a topic, is that the outcome is so much more powerful than one person sitting behind his laptop to solve a problem. THINKspiration gets companies to participate in real conversations that are happening amongst the workforce anyway.

"If something happens that affects the company, people will discuss it in the corridors. The fact that top management often don't want to hear what they say, doesn't change the fact that they talk about it," says Bernard.

But they (THINKspiration) also listen for positive feedback and try to identify strengths which the company can work with. "People love to have their ideas listened to, and employees often come up with brilliant ideas, that can be incorporated into the strategy."

Tracey says her previous experience in the advertising industry has taught her how to simplify masses of information, to see what's important and to package it in a creative way. She began to wonder why companies don't approach their internal communication using a similar innovative approach.
"Companies pay enormous amounts of money to advertising agencies to advertise externally, but internally the way most companies get their message across is decades behind."

The team often uses sport as a metaphor for the challenges of the corporate world. "Look for example at the passionate fans watching a soccer match. They are so involved in the game and their team – every person has an opinion and is not shy to express it. THAT's the kind of involvement and engagement that one wants from employees in a company."

If there's one thing that the Swanepoels feel strongly about, it's that the corporate world should be a more positive, encouraging environment." We simply can't force our employees to accept our vision and values, like we did in the past. Strategic communication needs a new game plan to ensure that everyone lives "happily ever after."

THINKspiration
STRATEGY TO STORY