



GETTING PAST GO

A START-UP GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP

Getting Past Go is a collection of materials designed to help organisations explore the idea of workplace partnership. It's a basic introduction to what's involved in working together in partnership, and the benefits and challenges for organisations adopting this approach. We've gathered together information to help you get started and keep moving towards a more productive workplace relationship.

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COMMUNICATION

Communication. *n.* the exchange of information, ideas, thoughts opinions or feelings.

Effective communication is a critical success factor for organisations wanting to adopt a partnership approach to working. A workplace partnership requires employers, the union and staff to communicate with each other regularly, honestly and effectively. This can sometimes be challenging in workplaces where people aren't used to the levels and type of communication required to build true partnership.

With partnership, effective communication enables us to discuss each other's concerns, acknowledge our different points of view and strive to understand those views. Good communication is especially important when there are strong views or feelings about an issue. The key thing to remember is that communication goes in all directions. Effective communication isn't just about telling people things. It's mostly about listening to each other.

To build a partnership, your organisation will need to:

- have a good understanding of the current state of the communications and relationships between the partners
- plan and structure your communications to ensure they are working to build partnership
- work with each other and behave in a way that supports the kind of communication that enables partnership.



HOW DOES POOR COMMUNICATION AFFECT PARTNERSHIP?

Good communication is crucial to partnership. Lack of communication often creates an information vacuum. This vacuum is sometimes filled with rumour and speculation. This is especially true when you add in the uncertainty that exists when an organisation is experiencing change.

When communication across the organisation is ineffective, communication channels close up, and you may see a tendency for parties to be negative and blame each other. Not surprisingly, when collective agreement negotiations break down, it will generally be because communication between the parties is no longer working.



Efforts to move towards a working partnership are hampered when communication breaks down and the partners go back to old ineffective ways of communicating and working with each other. When this happens, partners often stop seeing things from the range of perspectives necessary for partnership to work and revert back to 'us and them' styles of communication.

EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION – WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Partnership is about participation – it's based on getting everyone involved in the things that will help your organisation succeed. To do this, you need to ensure that everyone across the organisation receives relevant information, actively participates in conversations, has the opportunity to contribute ideas and is involved in developing and implementing those ideas.



Effective partnership communication is also about how we deal with each other and how we behave. If the goal is to become long-term partners, it's essential that all the partners agree on how they will communicate with each other. Organisations who are working in partnership have found these strategies have enabled them to build more effective communication:

- Building two-way communication channels (formal and informal) between the union and employer, at all levels of the organisation.

- Extending the content and range of communication so that partners communicate not only on employment relations, but on a range of issues that affect them, like the strategic direction of the organisation and the way work is organised.
- Agreeing that it is okay for there to be free and frank exchanges of views.
- Checking that what you think you're communicating is what's being received.
- Being prepared and able to discuss ideas and proposals without commitment.
- Establishing daily opportunities to have conversations about issues.
- Creating openness and transparency so that, even when things go wrong or there is disagreement, everyone is encouraged and able to continue talking.
- Always asking, "Who else needs to know?" and then making sure they do.
- Communicating the positives, not just the negatives.

ASSESSING YOUR CURRENT WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

Is the communication in your organisation effective? You may find that the answer is different depending on who you ask. If you're keen to explore a partnership relationship in your workplace, it's a good idea to assess the current state of communication between the partners. We've found a good approach is to jointly assess:

- the positives, or strengths in the way you communicate with each other
- any weaknesses in the way you communicate with each other
- workplace examples of communication that has been successful in the past
- workplace examples of situations where there has been a problem with communication
- any differences in how partners perceive communication to be operating.

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Knowing exactly what areas of your workplace communication need attention can help you focus your improvement efforts and monitor your progress.

It can also help to get an independent party to assist you with your assessment. The Workplace Partnerships: Diagnostic Toolkit has checklists you can use to guide your communication assessment.

BUILDING COMMUNICATION TO SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP

Separate communications demonstrate separateness. If there is to be a successful partnership, you'll need to build joint communication processes to support that partnership. A good place to start is to develop a straightforward partnership communications plan or agreement. Your plan could outline:

- your vision for partnership and the roles and responsibilities of the partners
- your agreed understanding of how you will communicate with each other
- how information will be communicated and how people will have input
- how ideas will be contributed and developed
- what types of meetings, forums and communication channels will be used
- any communication initiatives, structures or processes you plan to put in place to build effective communication across the organisation
- how you will monitor your workplace communication.

Once your communications plan is in place, the partners must come together to support the new communications approach and demonstrate to others in the organisation that this is how we communicate with each other. Regular and respectful joint communications demonstrate your commitment to partnership and give leaders an opportunity to model desirable behaviours.

THE COMMUNICATION DILEMMA

The dilemma here is how to keep a clear and consistent focus when there is open and widespread communication. Will chaos and confusion occur if communication is no longer prescriptive? The two components of communication – listening and telling – are both part of the communication mix, and they need to be used in appropriate measures. Building partnership generally requires more listening and less telling, and listening means understanding what people are really trying to say, not just hearing the words. Employers and union leaders will need to increase the quality and quantity of listening in the organisation, as well as improving the quality of the talking.

SUCCESS – WHAT SHOULD YOU AIM FOR?

You should aim for effective communication between the partners at all levels of the organisation and the union. When this happens, there is a greater chance you will understand each other's point of view or need, even if you don't agree with it, and you'll be able to manage conflict or a difference of opinion without damaging the long-term relationship.

Making the effort to improve your workplace communication will improve the way employers and the union work together and help you to behave in a way that supports and builds partnership.

Did you know?

One successful New Zealand business has made good communication an everyday thing, and they've seen the difference it can make. At Fisher & Paykel, management and the union have made a commitment to talk things through, so there is always clarity around any change affecting the organisation and the reasons for it. In their own words, "We have formal reviews of the partnership and so on, but Fisher & Paykel really works by doing it on a daily basis. We don't save up issues for a meeting or for negotiations, we get on with it, and we live it. And the question 'How can we do better?' permeates every aspect of our business".

Source: Fisher and Paykel: A Partnership Case Study, 2006.

Find out more

- **The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution.** Dudley Weeks, Penguin
- **Listen to Me Listen to You.** Anne and Mandy Kotzam, Penguin
- **Shifting Gears: High Performance Skills for New Zealand in the 21st Century.** Ian Oldham, David Bateman
- **The Communication Catalyst.** Mickey Connolly and Richard Rianoshek, Dearborn.

The Partnership Resource Centre's case studies on the partnership experiences of Asure NZ, Fisher & Paykel, and Winstone Pulp are available on our website or you can contact us for copies.

Things to think about

Before you move on, here are some things to think about:

1. Is the communication in your workplace effective – will it support a partnership approach to working together? How do you know?
2. What communication processes and systems do you use now – do these encourage and facilitate good, open communication?
3. Do you actively plan and manage communications in your workplace?
4. Are you willing to adapt the way you communicate across your organisation to move closer to a true workplace partnership?

Moving forward

- Read the other Getting Past Go materials to learn more about partnership.
- Talk with the Partnership Resource Centre and find out how they can help and support you to move towards partnership.
- Take a look at the **Workplace Partnerships: Diagnostic Toolkit**. It can guide you on how to assess the current state of communication in your workplace.
- Consider workplace training in the areas of joint partnership and communication skills, so key people in your organisation can learn, practise and explore new and effective ways of communicating.

PARTNERSHIP RESOURCE CENTRE

The Partnership Resource Centre provides advice on workplace partnership projects. The Centre has a team of independent associates who have extensive knowledge and experience in industrial relations and organisational development. Our Associates work alongside employers, unions and staff and help them develop constructive workplace partnerships, improve partnership practices, or work through particular problems. Contact us to find out more about partnership and what we can do to help you.

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