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“TWO-WAY COMMUNICATIONS
IMPROVEMENT FROM THE BOTTOM-UP:
LOCKHEED MARTIN CASE STUDY”

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52 KAIN ROAD
WARWICK, NY
10990

845.988.5855
WWW.LMDULYE.COM

Lockheed Martin combines formal and informal feedback methods to foster communication across all layers of the organization.

Two-way communications improvement from the bottom-up



Case study

This feature case study examines a communication initiative at Lockheed Martin that fosters interaction between employees and senior leadership.

Effective cross-organizational feedback is the essence of communication, but it doesn't simply occur in a vacuum.

Successful feedback programs marry formal and informal techniques that are focused, objective-driven, measurable, structured and persistent. Successful feedback

programs should also seek to drive open dialogue at all levels of the organization. All these characteristics are on display in the communication work-out process underway in the Astronautics Operations division of Lockheed Martin Space Systems (LM A/O).

Company profile

Name: Lockheed Martin Space Systems, Astronautics Operations (LM A/O)

Business: Advanced technology systems for space and defense

Headquarters: Denver, Colorado

Workforce: 7,400 (operations)

The workout-process in action

The work-out process forms part of the organization's two-way communications improvement initiative. For a full day, front-line employees, managers and senior leaders, including the vice president of LM A/O, gathered to finalize and consider team recommendations and reports on issues defined, through employee feedback, as important and pressing. At day's end, senior leaders sounded their decisions as to every recommendation placed before them.

What is accomplished by this communications action planning, known as the communications work-out process? (The process is modeled, in part, on General Electric's highly successful Work-Out program.) "Its goal is to stimulate open and candid dialogue among an organization's leadership, management, and front-line employees," says Linda Dulye, president of L.M. Dulye and Co., which has structured and supported Lockheed Martin's two-way communications initiative. In addition to dialogue, she adds, the work-out process:

- Supports grass-roots efforts to get at critical issues;

- Distributes problem-solving;
- Improves work practices;
- Speeds up decision-making;
- Builds a common action plan around solutions and action points at all levels of the organization;
- Integrates best practices across the organization.

The process uses broad-based feedback to develop bottom-up solutions, which Dulye says builds ownership and accountability. It also relies upon senior leadership's trust in the front-line resources that have access to the data needed to construct and implement those solutions. Finally, says Dulye, the process assigns a special and critical role to measurement, to evaluate data and monitor progress. Above all, it's an interactive process totally dependent on effective feedback at all levels.

Preparing for the work-out

At LM A/O, the communications planning process begins several months before the day-long work-out session with the identification of critical communication issues. These issues, called "red flags," are identified and prioritized based on data from communication surveys (conducted among all astronautics employees). These "red-flag" issues, are assigned to cross-disciplinary front-line teams to address. (See Figure 1, below, for examples of red flag issues.).

In addition to a team leader, each work-out team has a facilitator and a management sponsor who is a member of the senior leadership team.

Figure 1: Organizational structure for team discussions

Communication Topic	Red Flag Issue
Organizational changes	Inadequate communication before, during, and after organizational/managerial changes
Recognition	Perception of inadequate communication about recognizing performance
Training	Ineffective communication about training opportunities
Work-out results	Ineffective communication about work-out results

Facilitators' responsibilities include ensuring that teams:

- Focus awareness on best practices from previous work-out teams;
- Maintain open and constructive discussion among team members;
- Resolve conflict effectively;
- Comply with all work-out templates;
- Participate, while remaining neutral, in a team's action plan to implement approved recommendations.

General dialogue principles:

- Listen carefully
- Think creatively and constructively
- Pay attention to process
- Respect differences
- Move away from thinking in terms of right or wrong answers

Management sponsors meet with their teams at least once before an all day work-out session is scheduled for everyone involved in the action planning process. This initial discussion is spent on reviewing a team's particular red flag issue and listening to its analysis of the issue. Available as resources to team leaders, the sponsors add leverage for teams' recommendations to the senior management group for on-the-spot decisions. Sponsors remain with their teams through implementation of the approved recommendations.

Team members themselves are expected to:

- Participate in meetings with constructive ideas;
- Gather data to support the team's analysis of its red flag issues;
- Carefully structure recommendations;
- Adhere to work-out templates for consistency, accuracy and completeness;
- Communicate among their peers the team's outcomes and action plans.

Gathering data and applying analysis

Data-gathering is an important part of each team's activities. Teams choose their research methods with care, typically employing small cross-organizational surveys and analyzing the results. "Hall talk" – peer comments, anecdotes and observations – supplements data from the formal communications survey. Team members share this information with their colleagues and collaborate on ways to organize it and apply it effectively to the analysis of their red flag issue.

Each team follows a clearly defined process, guided by a series of templates designed to capture the team's activity milestones. The process begins with the team's definition of the problem. Every red flag issue must be translated into a statement of a specific problem that addresses

both the fundamental issue(s) at hand and the impact that the problem has on business performance. Thus, the team assigned to focus on the communication of organizational changes viewed the problem in terms of (1) a need to understand the rationale for change; and (2) its impact on consistency of evaluations and the consistency with which supervisors communicate expectations.

Breaking down barriers

Teams approach problems through root cause analysis. Each problem is considered in light of both the barriers to solution and the reasons offered to explain the barriers. (Every root classically triggers five “why’s.”) Team members, asked to identify the impact that barriers have on employees and work process, are invited to contribute ideas for dismantling barriers. The teams always refer to their data sets – the results of their research tools and hall talk forays – when describing the problem and proposing solutions. It’s fundamentally important that a team’s perspective take in the whole organization, rather than any member’s particular corner of it. A template is provided to capture the team’s statement of root causes and corresponding reasons.

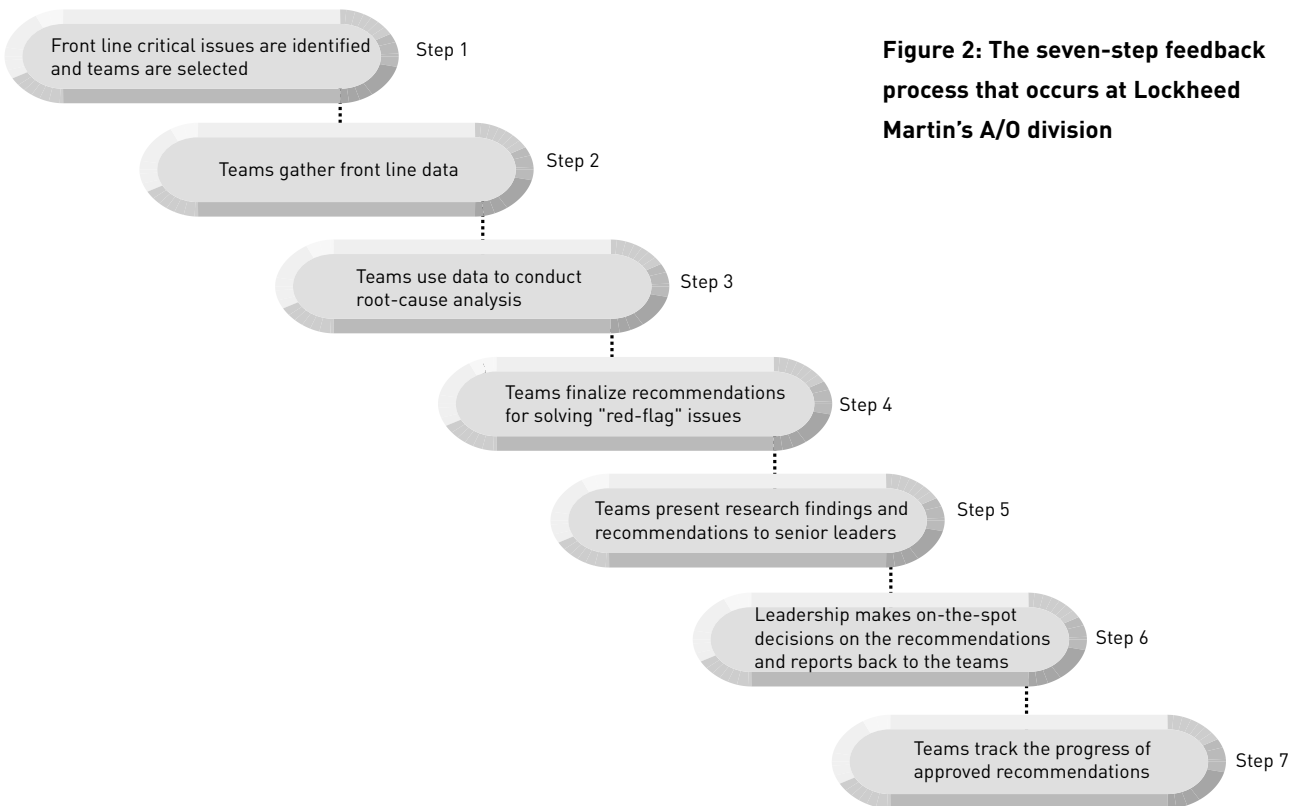
The root cause analysis serves as the basis for the next phase of a team’s discussion: potential actions or solutions to eliminate the red flag issue. Teams, encouraged to consider best practices elsewhere in the company, prioritize their proposed solutions and choose the top five. (Everything else is referred to the “parking lot,” where secondary action points that failed to be included in the teams’ final recommendations remain until the team has time to revisit them.)

The team is now in a position to recommend specific actions that will support each solution. Each recommendation, however, must be accompanied by information that states:

- The anticipated results;
- Specific activities that the recommendation requires;
- A time frame, anticipated costs, and other resources;
- The groups or individuals responsible for implementation;
- Metrics that will enable tracking of the implemented action item and its impact on business performance.

The work-out begins

With the exception of an orientation session to review the process,



tools and schedule comprising the communication work-out process, the Astronautics teams meet independently for several weeks. A full-day work session with senior leaders re-unites them. The morning hours of the formal work session are spent with teams finalizing their recommendations and formal report-outs of recommendations. All team members then convene, with every member of the leadership group, to present their research findings and recommendations. Next the senior leadership group reviews recommendations again and makes a decision on each. Decisions fall in one of three categories:

- Accept a recommendation;
- Accept a recommendation with modifications; or
- Reject a recommendation, but with supporting rationale.

Quality of details, clarity and language play a strong role in the senior leadership group's decision-making process. Teams hear senior leaders' decisions before leaving the work session. An active plan is compiled from all endorsed recommendations. Specific accountability is assigned for the implementation of the recommendations and a process is developed for tracking and reporting progress.

Following the progress

Teams are expected to track and report on their approved action plans until completion. Team leads review progress monthly at regular all-hands' meetings and during business reviews with the senior leaders. A red-yellow-green "stoplight" coding is used to indicate status on key actions, team participation, and executive support. Red indicates the activity has limited support or faces unresolved issues. Yellow indicates additional support is needed or minor slippage in schedule. Green indicates full support, on-time performance or completion. Marshall Byrd, LM A/O vice president, says "This process definitely increases and improves communications. We're spending less time with unclear communications and have increased efficiency as a result. As we improve communications, we improve the producibility of our product, which contributes directly to mission success."

The communications action planning work-out process enables participants to focus on solutions, and encourages rich and constructive feedback at all levels. Its success relies on frank and interactive communication, clarity of process, careful documentation, and effective teams. While the active support of senior leaders plays a crucial role, bottom-up engagement provides the critical momentum. With a foundation in place, the process also allows for fast decision-making, a key component of employee support.

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10 Top tips for making work-outs work

1. Involve everyone . Open dialogue at all levels of the organization – front-line employees, managers and senior leaders.
2. Begin early. Start planning the session and talk to everyone involved.
3. Gather data . Use formal and informal methods to obtain feedback.
4. Define "red flags." Identify and prioritize issues; then assign them to cross-disciplinary front-line teams to address.
5. Set guidelines . Follow a clearly defined process, guided by a series of templates designed to capture the team's activity milestones.
6. Employ root cause analysis . Consider the barriers to solution and the reasons offered to explain the barriers.
7. Be specific . Recommend specific actions that will support each solution.
8. Be coherent and clear . All team members meet with the leadership group to present their research and recommendations.
9. Report early . Senior leaders' share their decisions with teams at the end of day.
10. Track progress . Teams review progress at regular all-hands' meetings and during business reviews with the senior leaders.

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