

Should you keep your boss in the loop when connecting with people from other departments?

Submitted by: BlueSky Education

Friday, 24 September 2021

There are many benefits generated by employees connecting with people in different areas or departments. However, the managers of these employees can react negatively if they are not kept in the loop, according to new research from ESMT Berlin (<https://esmt.berlin/>).

The research was conducted by Eric Quintane, associate professor of organisational behaviour at ESMT Berlin, alongside colleagues Julija N. Mell, Rotterdam School of Management (<https://www.rsm.nl/>), Giles Hirst, Australia National University (<https://www.anu.edu.au/>), and Andrew Carnegie, Carnegie Consulting Group. The aim was to understand when and why supervisors may undermine employees' attempts at boundary spanning: the seeking of advice with other employees outside their group or department. The researchers say that, although advice-seeking from other employees external to their department is hugely positive for employees, their group, and the company in fostering innovation and finding solutions to problems, supervisors can undermine employee's efforts to do so, due to fears of losing control over their group.

The researchers administered a survey to over 300 participants based mainly in the US and the UK. Participants were employees who were asked to list a number of contacts they had sought work-related advice from in the last six months, and report on whether these contacts were part of their group or department as well as whether they had been undermined by their superiors. The researchers then conducted an experimental study with over 400 employees with managerial experience using multiple scenarios involving boundary-spanning of their employees and how they would act in these specific situations.

"Often managers have feelings of possessiveness over their teams and their team's actions. They have a strong sense of psychological ownership over these teams," says Professor Quintane. "This tends to be for three reasons; first because their own performance is typically linked with the performance of their team, but also because over time, managers develop deep knowledge of employees' skill, activities, goals, and needs, and finally, because managers are expected to help employees reach their goals through their effective control and management. These reasons combined can explain why supervisors develop a strong sense of control over their teams."

Though much of the prior research into boundary spanning has underlined the importance of leaders facilitating this activity, it is clear that many may resist actively encouraging it, some even going as far as to undermine their subordinates because of this.

This finding suggests that an organisation's attempt to promote boundary spanning of its employees may completely miss the mark and lead to negative consequences for employees if their superior has a negative perception of the activity. However, the researchers found that when employees keep their supervisors in the loop, they are much less likely to react negatively. The researchers recommend that organisations should look to further educate employees on the potential risks that boundary spanning could have for them, and ensure that they establish a clear line of communication to their direct superior. If the risks associated to boundary spanning are well managed, employees are more likely to ensure boundary spanning is effective and brings positive benefits to themselves, their group, and the organisation.

This research was published in the Journal of Applied Psychology.

For more information, a copy of the research paper, or to speak with Prof Quintane, contact Kyle Grizzell from BlueSky Education at kyle@bluesky-pr.com or on 01582 790709