

Stiftung Warentest: Theme oriented communication and cooperation across different departments

What does this case study demonstrate?

The foundation established a culture of continuous improvement and development based on the cooperation of employees across the borders of different departments. With a structural change of the organisation and workplaces, the institution setup subject related teams across the different departments. A ground for a theme related and company overarching cooperation and communication across divisional and hierarchical borders was established as well as a continuous participation of the employees and exchange of information of the different company divisions (in-house “fairs”) are guaranteed. This provides the ground for a continuous improvement and development process, learning from each other and from the feedback of the consumers, the public and companies whose products were tested.

Workplace innovation elements: work organisation practice, learning and reflection partnership, structure and system improvement

Context

The foundation was setup as a public funded institution for consumer counselling, testing and assessment of products. About 80% of the German public knows this foundation. 90% of the costs of the foundation are reimbursed by publication of test results, and about 10% is funded through public money which compensates for the missing advertisement, sales promotion income possibilities. Because of the high observation and criticism by companies whose products are tested the foundation has to rely on the quality and accuracy of its outcomes, and the publication of test results.

Subject related teams

Teams of employees, composed of mainly 20 to 30 employees from two departments with different professions (scientific test department and publishing department), were set up to guarantee cooperation between scientists and journalists and better customer oriented publications. The two departments worked separately before, good scientific work was not edited in an interesting way for the customers. To improve the cooperation for the benefit of the customer related publication of test results, specific subject related teams were built across the two departments “scientific tests” and “journalism”. The employees of these teams had to change their rooms and they are now working closely together on the same floors. This was done by a comprehensive relocation of working places. Now the scientists, engineers and the journalists are working together on a test theme from the beginning (the idea: What kind of product should be tested? Is it currently relevant for the public?) to the test preparation and the publication of results in the end. The project management is in the beginning, during the testing phase of products, more in the hands of the scientists and at the publication stage at the end of the process is more in the hands of the journalists, but in a cooperative way of production.

In the beginning there were some divisions, groups against the WPI. To involve the employees and to solve problems common working groups were setup, with employees across the relevant departments and divisions, led by “normal” intrinsic motivated employees (not managers). An evaluation two years later stated a broad acceptance all over every division and department because of the positive results of the cross-department cooperation.

Company internal “fairs”

Once a year different divisions of the institution (parts of the departments) present themselves to other departments in company internal fairs. In a kind of open house presentation the employees of the division present what they are doing and how their work is related to the other parts of the company and other departments. Contents and themes of the divisions are discussed (including the reaction of companies whose products were tested). The criticism of the public is analysed in common in order to learn from it and to study how the foundation is seen from outside. This helps to find out mistakes and inaccuracies as well as ways to avoid these in the future. It is of high importance to let the whole foundation participate at this learning process to learn from each other and from mistakes.

Institutionalised Employee Participation

Several instruments like yearly appraisal interviews and team meetings are setup to integrate the employee’s perspective and knowledge in the organisational development and the continuous training of the employees. Transparency and participation across all hierarchical levels is seen as the ground for high quality in testing and assessing products for the consumers. There are institutionalised participation procedures (monthly team meetings, editorial meetings, yearly informal meeting between line manager and employees, etc.) for the employees to articulate their ideas, hints and conceptions as well as to foster their career and training planning. Concerning training there is a collection of the demands across the departments and a prioritisation of the relevant training themes for securing synergies. Instead of hierarchical careers (because of only a few formal hierarchical levels and an emphasis on team orientation in the company) the foundation is fostering “mosaic” careers by giving possibilities for “horizontal” careers: offering the employees the participation in new projects, different tasks, themes and positions.

So who benefits?

The main motivation for WPI was to stand the external criticism and to improve the quality of work continuously. This is done by a common work place communication across internal borders, hierarchies, departments and divisions. Once established it is a clear win-win situation: for the foundation, the management and the employees. The employees benefit from being heard and integrated in the production of the outcomes in an optimal way.

The foundation developed a new organisation structure top-down, tested and adjusted bottom-up and finally decided by the management, but at least not only accepted but lived in everyday work by all the related employees.

Prognosis

The company’s overarching new workplace structure is giving the ground for a quality and innovation improving cooperation across the main departments (research and test units and the publication unit) and hierarchies. The foundation gave employee participation a common institutionalised ground for a continuous improvement and development process bottom-up. After an overarching process including all the employees and different adjustment processes of organisation and cooperation structures the final “subject related teams” were implemented, still running today successfully and fully accepted by the employees.

This implemented common working platform of researchers and journalists across different departments for the benefit of innovative themes, improved quality and consumer friendliness of the outcomes and products and is still running and improving day-to-day work.