

# building a strong connect

HDFC SL through its structured communication program, 'Sparsh', touches base at a level with employees wherein they are able to connect to all aspects of their work and the organization

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In the year 2007 during the months of November and December, HDFC Standard Life (HDFC SL) launched an annual companywide employee communication program named 'Sparsh'. The program provides a platform for communicating corporate plans to all employees; seek their suggestions, which create an environment of open dialogue about the company's plans and performance across the organization and on its effective execution. It also gives an opportunity to employees to interact and seek clarity on the company's direction and motivates them to contribute towards the vision of the company, which is the 'most obvious choice for all'. More importantly, as Rajendra Ghag, the executive VP HR and administration of the company, says "Sparsh ensures a strong connect with employees".

'Sparsh' is designed in such a way that it reaches out to the last employee. More than 14000 employees attend the program every year. The program invitation is sent to employees at least 15 days in advance. The event starts with the calendar preparation, organizing speaker's time, venue finalization, etc. Depending on the theme of the year, presentations are designed capturing information on the industry performance, business performance, initiative updates, achievements, organizational goals, and so on. The entire communication meet happens at four levels, viz. at the zonal, regional, territory managers (TM) and the branch/spoke level, which all lasts up to 4 hours at each level and are conducted at a banquet hall at the respective places except at the branch

level, which is conducted in the training rooms at the office premises. The selection of the employees for the meet depends upon the location they are based at. "We always try to club locations if the traveling time from these locations to the venue is not more than 2 hours," informs Ghag. This forum meet is completed up

to the last branch within 40 days of commencement of the respective zonal communication meet.

At the first level, the managing director & CEO addresses the employees based at the corporate office. More than 500 employees get an opportunity to get into a dialogue with the senior management and get their insights into the company's plans and performance. The completion of this session gives a direction to senior management to proceed with the sessions at other locations. The second level of communication meet happens at the zonal locations.

## HOW SPARSH WORKS

Participation of more than 14000 employees every year

The meet happens at four levels, viz. zonal, regional, territory managers (TM) and the branch/spoke level

Each meet is of four hours

The meet is completed up to the last branch within 40 days of commencement of the respective zonal communication meet

A question and answer session of around one hour is held at the end of the meet

In the last meeting around 60 questions were gathered on different topics which were answered with the help of respective functional heads within one month of aforesaid meeting

The program has led to a greater sense of belonging for employees, they are more engaged, which in turn, drives their motivation levels and productivity

On a long term basis - the impact is measurable by the company's growth rate with higher productivity



Employee Communication Meet at HDFC Standard Life

General Managers travel to these locations to conduct the session and address the employees along with the business heads and zonal leadership team members. At the zonal level, more than 4500 employees gets an opportunity to get into a dialogue with the senior management to get insights on the organization's plans and performance. On the third level, communication meets happens at the regional locations. The head of the departments travel to these locations to conduct the sessions and address the employees along with the zonal and regional leadership team members. Here HDFC SL sees participation from more than 3000 employees. After the completion of the regional locations, the meet proceeds at the territory and branch locations. The zonal and regional leaders travel to conduct the session and address the employees at these locations. At this level more than 6000 employees are covered.

A question and answer session of around one hour is held at the end of the meet. Employees put forth their queries, issues, doubts or concerns on areas related to management, product portfolio, customer segments, people, process, policies, industry, regulations, agency rewards and recognition, company/brand, employee benefits, organizational changes, growth, performance, etc. "And while addressing those queries, management, in addition, to solving the queries also gives their insights on the impact of the same and how it can be embraced for the benefit of the organization," avers Ghag. The HR representative makes a note of the activities being followed in the communication meet, prepares a list of questions and responses being discussed in the Q&A sessions and sends a detailed report to the head

HR within 24 hours of conclusion of the meet for further action.

HDFC SL ensures that employee queries, which are not answered in the 'Sparsh' meet, are resolved as soon as possible. "Such meetings have been very well received, after our last meeting we gathered 60 questions on different topics which were answered with the help of respective functional heads within one month of aforesaid meeting," reveals Ghag. Also, as a practice, he says, they clearly communicate during such sessions that the questions asked by employees will not be taken personally against them and in no way impact their career in the organization, which helps create a positive culture in the organization.

After receiving details of the Q&A session, the FAQs are looked upon once again. In the event, if any query remains unresolved it is sent to the respective department for a timely resolution. Simultaneously, all the relevant suggestions are collated and sent to the senior management to decide the further course of action on the same. Depending on the impact and relevance of the suggestions, the same gets implemented.

The whole idea of Sparsh germinated from HDFC SL's employee engagement survey held in 2007, which captured employees perception on a number of dimensions related to engagement. "The survey gave us a lot of insights to improve our processes and systems that would enable us to keep up with the dynamic business environment and gain a competitive edge in the industry," reflects Ghag. From here, the need to communicate to employees effectively was raised and we decided to conceptualize a structured communication program on a large scale, he explains.



Employees attending Sparsh

Thus, the program 'Sparsh' was introduced across the company for meeting its deliverables successfully. Since it became imperative to continue with this initiative in the coming years the trend was followed and the 'Sparsh' meetings have been conducted successfully for three consecutive years till now. This encouraged employees to contribute towards "Efficiency Driven Profitable Growth" theme for the last two years and made all of us partners in pursuit of larger organizational goals and challenges. More importantly, emphasizes Ghag, this initiative was a step towards building greater transparency in the system and thus making HDFC SL a stronger workplace.

"Today employees want access to more and better information. They look for open and accessible communication and this is what exactly 'Sparsh' brings to them," explains Ghag. With a wide base of information and unique opportunity to make a difference with their inputs, HDFC SL employees look forward for the 'Sparsh' meetings. It has gained popularity in the eyes of employees by fulfilling the said deliverables, implementing their relevant suggestions and resolving their queries on time. All this has built on the credibility of the initiative, Ghag notes. Explaining further, he says, employees feel that such initiatives radiate energy and transparency, which results in greater effectiveness, optimism and also is the force multiplier. Since it is a live gathering of hundreds of employees at every location it provides a good networking and social opportunity to employees, which is awaited for every time.

Vouching on the program, one of the employees, Wilma Fernandes, executive assistant, marketing in Mumbai opines that Sparsh is an example of HDFC SL's open and honest two way communication, at all levels. She feels that this positively impacts the level of HDFC SL services. It makes us feel that we are a

part of the process and that our voices matter. We are encouraged to share ideas, which give us a sense of involvement in the company's activities. This also lets us devote a higher level of trust in the company and motivates us to work honestly and fairly. For Joanne de Souza, executive-HR in Mumbai, Sparsh highlights a broader perspective of industry, competition, policies, procedures etc., in short, for her it is a knowledge sharing platform.<sup>1</sup> Deepak Shirodkar, senior manager at Pune branch feels Sparsh is a good forum for interaction with management. Rakesh K Savjani, who is an executive at the Vadodara-Karelibaug branch, looks forward to this meet every year. And,

Nisha Hrishikesh Barbhai an executive from the Pune-Nandadeep FC Road believes that the program is a good platform where the management hears employee's suggestions and feedback, which is truly motivating. She adds that there is also a feeling of pride when their suggestions get implemented. For HDFC SL employees, Sparsh leads to a greater sense of belonging, they are more engaged, which in turn, drives their motivation levels and productivity.

At the employee level, the program is motivating and engaging, but, even 'Sparsh' consistently correlates to the business outcomes, too. Since HDFC SL is spread across smaller towns and cities a healthy communication system is critical for the company. On a long term basis - the impact is measurable by the company's growth rate with higher productivity. Clarity on company goals, performance and achievements and a greater sense of awareness through information sharing are some of the direct benefits on the bottom line.

Benefits of this program are truly elevating, although, driving participation and ensuring success of this large scale event with active involvement is challenging. Apart from this completion of the event on time is also a challenge for HDFC SL. These, however, can be addressed with awareness and creating a buzz around the activity, says Ghag confidently. Despite some challenges, HDFC SL believes in moving ahead and lays emphasis more on areas like addressing employees' queries and analyzing their feedback/suggestions and ensuring implementation on time.

Lastly, Ghag feels that, not only does 'Sparsh' enable senior leadership to keep employees informed, engaged and in sync with business goals, but, in a rapidly growing industry like insurance, it is rather inevitable to have live channels of communication; both formal and informal so as to transfer critical messages top-down and bottom-up."