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Cutting Through the Noise: Understanding Internal Communications

BY HEATHER MARASSE & ELISA MASELLI

The engine of organizations is communication. Contrary to popular quotes such as “talk is cheap”, communication is, in fact, how almost all work is done. Pretend to look at an organization as if from outer space, and try to figure out what is actually happening. What would you see? What is called ‘organization’ is really just people talking to each other—some in person, some on phones,

some through computers. Yes, there are often instances of people sitting in their offices, working quietly and alone—but the vast majority of work is accomplished through communication. And even when people sit quietly and alone in their offices, they are in the process of creating something that will be communicated to someone, or some “ones.”

If communication is, in fact, the way work is done, then it is reasonable to infer that how organizations communicate will have an effect on the outcomes produced. Yet organizational communication, particularly internal communication, remains a very challenging thing to get “right.” A 2009 Hay Group study indicates that only half of employees surveyed believe that communications are well-handled when changes are being made, and that managers do a good job of explaining the reasons behind decisions and actions.¹

A True Story

In a recent merger of three companies, the new CEO was pretty sure of his ability to win over the troops, but he was surprised when his first few communications – both written and in person – were met with skepticism, disbelief, and in a few cases, outrage. Of course, this is not unusual in acquisitions, where trust is non-existent and people are concerned about retaining not only their jobs but also their current work culture. This executive received an anonymous letter from an employee, asking him to “see the situation from my point of view.” To his credit, the CEO took a very different approach on his next communication, and sent a memo to all employees, acknowledging the letter he received, reiterating the concerns of that employee, and addressing each concern with his own commitment to the employees and the company. This was a turning point in his relationship with the people who worked for the new company. It also began to create a culture in which it is acceptable to give the bad news as well as the good, to tell the truth, and to demonstrate appreciation for people’s commitments and concerns.

A Second True Story

I got a valuable lesson in brevity in graduate school. I came to my MBA program with a liberal arts undergraduate degree, where the logical construction of arguments and deep, thoughtful language was rewarded. My first professor in business school told us, “You can write as long a paper as you like, but I’m going to stop reading at the end of the second page. You’ll be graded on what I read.” Suddenly I had to retrain myself on composition! I learned to use what journalists call the “inverted pyramid” starting with the bottom line or the conclusion, and then providing support for that premise at the level of detail that my audience would care about.

A lot of time and energy is spent within organizations on external communication. Public relations, marketing, advertising and lobbying are all jazzy and exciting fields, and a great deal of sweat and expertise is applied to creating the right external identity and messaging for an enterprise. But what really creates an organization’s identity, the internal ‘juice’ that fuels the system’s engine, is internal communication. It is the inside conversations, dialogue, and even rumours that create an organization’s reality: the “way it is around here” and “what is really going on.” As anyone who has been an agent for change will know, the undertaking of internal communication strategy is fraught with challenges and opportunities for frustration.

I.

THE CHALLENGES OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: MEDIA & MESSAGE OVERLOAD

Today’s organizations are dealing with change at an unprecedented level, and in order to cause change, one must master the art of communication. Yet, particularly in the workplace, people are worn out by the sensory assault of a barrage of media messages at all times. The result is a population in most organizations that is numbed out by media overload.

It starts with the ubiquitous computers that sit on all office desks, and travel with their owners to most meetings. Phones and Blackberries are always buzzing. Add in the video display screens suspended from walls and ceilings, running continuous internal and/or external news feeds, with more of them in the elevators of many multi-story office buildings. And that’s not even counting the plethora of bulletin boards, posters, newspapers and newsletters, magazines and more.

So how does one get the attention of this audience? How does a manager break through all the background noise and chatter so that his or her message gets through in a way that galvanizes the action required to mobilize an organization around an initiative for change and growth?

II.

FOUR FUNDAMENTAL RULES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

A well-thought-out internal communication strategy serves several purposes. First, it establishes leadership and re-affirms direction, priorities and focus. Second, it provides a continuous thread throughout a change process that: Keeps people informed; keeps people moving forward and producing necessary business results; mitigates the proliferation of rumors, gossip, and inaccurate information; expresses encouragement and possibility during difficult times. And lastly, it gives people an opportunity to provide feedback and input, which increases engagement. Creating

¹ Hay Group Insight, July 2009.



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successful internal communication boils down to four fundamental rules: Know your audience; tell the truth; don’t do it alone; and, repetition.

1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

While the natural inclination when designing a communication strategy is to focus on messaging, i.e., “What are the key things we want people to know?”, a better starting point is actually the opposite side of the equation. Instead of transmission, think reception. Who are the target communities for this communication, and what are they listening to? Even more accurately, what are they listening *for*? Capturing the answer to that question accurately is a surefire way to cut through the noise that is always in the background, so the message will get through to the intended audience. It seems so obvious to say, “Know your audience”. But is it? What really grabs people’s attention inside organizations? What are people listening for?

BEWARE THE GOLDEN RULE

Many of us were raised with the Golden Rule as a way of life: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” However, in communication, don’t treat people like you want to be treated, unless they are in fact like you. Your audience may not need or want the same level of detail you want, or they may not have your passion for your field. So don’t ask yourself, “What would I want to know?” Rather ask, “What does my audience want to know?” Communication theorist Milton Bennett points out that many communication problems stem from assuming that other people are like us, and then treating them that way.² Pretend that your audience is from another country, and get interested in how they see the world, what is important to them, and what they want to know.

ADDRESS AUDIENCE COMMITMENTS AND CONCERNS

Addressing the audience’s self-interest, or their commitments and

concerns, will help your communication break through the fog of automatic listening. Find out what they are committed to, what they want to—or have to—accomplish; or what they are concerned about, what worries them or keeps them up at night. If you tailor your communication so that your message tells them something that will help them get their jobs done, further their commitments, or reduce their concerns, they will be interested in what you have to say. Yes, this means that you may have to construct a few different communications for different audiences, but it is worth it to increase the chances of being heard.

2. TELL THE TRUTH: IT SOUNDS SIMPLE, BUT IT IS NOT EASY

Once you have people’s attention and you are aware of what they are listening for, the next step is critical: Tell the truth. The construction of a clear, impactful communication starts with summarizing the current situation. Talk or write about where things stand now, and do not be afraid to give the bad news along with the good. If the current reality is sugarcoated, or negative aspects are glossed over, the audience will think that leadership is out of touch with what is really happening. Once the truth has been acknowledged about the current situation, then and only then can the future possibility created by the change initiative be credibly heard. Working in this way honors the past, and helps tie the future to the present. Finally, tell people what is required of them, the actions that they need to take or that others will take, to build the bridge to the future. Very basically, the flow is:

- Here’s where we are now (the current situation or what’s so)
- Here’s where we’re going (the future, what’s possible)
- Here’s how we’re going to get there (actions, what’s next)

A brief example might go like this: “Today, like many other organizations, we find ourselves at the effect of the global econ-

COMPLAINTS: A CLUE TO WHAT PEOPLE REALLY CARE ABOUT

Complaints can really get you down when you are leading a change initiative. It’s easy to view pushback as resistance to change and so dismiss it, and thus to overlook the gold that’s hidden within. Complaints boil down to three different types, and one of them, “Committed Complaining”, can be a source of valuable input and help to catalyze action.

RECREATIONAL COMPLAINING
Recreational complaining looks like play; it engages the imagination, and might even feel like fun to do, but not much information is available for future action. Example: Conversations about “ain’t it awful...” played out in the hallway, by the water cooler, in the restroom.

EXPRESSIVE COMPLAINING
Sometimes people just have to get something out of their system. It helps to have someone listen when emotions keep you riled up and unfocused. Example: “I missed my connecting flight by 20 minutes, and I was six hours late getting home. I’m exhausted!” Listen carefully for possible actions – but usually there isn’t much to do other than sympathize.

COMMITTED COMPLAINING
If you listen attentively, in this case the person with the complaint is actually making a request. The complaint gives insight into the commitments or concerns of the complainer. Example: “I’m sick and tired of the fact that at least half of this team is so often late to meetings. Can’t we do something about that?” Here, the background commitment can be seen as more effective use of time, and possibly also fuller participation in meetings.

² Milton Bennett, “A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity” 1993.

omy. Participation in our programs is down 15 percent. Surveys of our target audience indicate that they believe we still have the best programs, and the only factor preventing them from participating is available funding in their budgets. (*What's So*—the bad news is that participation is down, the good news is that it is not because of our quality.) As a result, we have decided to revise our program offerings, to shorten the duration so that we can lower the price, and offer payment plans to certain customers. (*What's Possible*: Here is the future we're headed toward, to address the current situation.) Over the next month, we will be convening task forces to review all of our program offerings, and brainstorm ideas for reducing the timeframes while maintaining or increasing the impact. You will be hearing from your manager within the next 10 days about the schedule for these meetings. (*What's Next*: includes timeframes and a brief description of the actions that will be required). Thank you for everything you have done to help us navigate these difficult economic waters. Your ideas and contributions are inspiring, and we will be looking for more of them during our upcoming meetings.”

APPRECIATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is also important to let people know what you appreciate about their work and why. Research by both Gallup and Towers Perrin shows that appreciation and acknowledgement drive motivation and engagement, which in turn drive performance.³ It is our view that people come to work to contribute, and they want to know that

their work makes a difference and is valued. Again, know your audience and speak as specifically as you can to the value of their contribution and what it took to provide it.

3. DON'T DO IT ALONE: HAVE COLLABORATORS AND ALLOW FOR SOAK TIME

It is romantic to imagine a lonely author, sitting in a drafty garret someplace writing the next great novel, and it is an even more alluring fantasy in this day and age of information overload. The solitude seems so welcomed, especially if you are crafting communication. However, even the best writers have good editors – just as the best athletes have coaches. Having a set of fresh eyes to review another person’s writing is invaluable. As a practice, when asked to read material that others have created, the first questions to ask are always, “Who is the audience for this communication, and what’s the purpose of it? What do you want them to know, feel and do as a result of reading it?”

CO-CREATE

After looking at something for a long time, carefully crafting the message, remembering to tell the truth, and building the bridge from the present to the future, often the words become so familiar that they seem to blur together. It is useful to leave some time for “soaking” – writing a draft and then sleeping on it, and revisiting it in the next day or two when you can come to it with brighter eyes. Having arrived at a satisfactory version, ask someone to read

TIPS FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- In no particular order, here are some “tips” about how to craft a successful internal communication.
- Small, frequent pulses are best—don’t assume that you can do one big blast and be done with it. Communication is like the heartbeat that keeps an organization alive.
 - Include the personal touch
 - Acknowledge successes and stay on top of what is not working or missing, and be willing to tell the truth
 - Create a consistent message, and repeat it over and over
 - Listen, don’t just talk
 - Empower and speak highly of the rest of the your team
 - Keep the tone “seriously light”
 - Keep the messages simple (7 +/- 2 bits of information at a time)
 - Use the power of story
 - Mix up the vehicles, and include formal and informal modes of delivery
 - Mix up the presenters
 - Address the commitments and concerns of audience
 - Include frequent requests for feedback and input
 - Acknowledge input with a response (even if the response is “I don’t know” or “I decline”)
 - Record successes and acknowledge people for their efforts
 - Seize opportunities to communicate to large audiences—the same message to as many people as possible
 - The “human touch” is essential (be authentic)
 - Include executive presence and involvement in the process.

POSSIBLE VEHICLES FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- There are lots of ways to get the message out. Remember, however, that the best communication vehicle is a human being. Get out among people, listen, learn, and deliver your message.
- Newsletters
 - Town Halls
 - Functional meetings
 - Memos (all company)
 - MBWA (management by walking around)
 - Internal video or TV
 - Webcasts
 - Lunch and learns
 - Small group breakfasts
 - Events (picnics, bowling, celebrations)
 - Cards, screen savers, mouse pads, posters, etc.

³ “Employee Engagement Levels Are Focus of Global Towers Perrin Study,” Towers Perrin Monitor, January 2006; “Building a Highly Engaged Workforce,” Gallup Management Journal, June 2002.



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it and give feedback. It doesn't all need to be incorporated, but there are always some nuggets of gold to help further refine the message.

The best reviewer is someone who will tell the truth. Pick a colleague or friend who has an ear for language and an eye for typos that aren't caught by spell-check. Find a committed partner or two who will also be a co-creator, not just an editor – ask for their opinion on the flow, logic and impact of your communication.

KEEP IT BRIEF AND CRISP

Give co-creators permission to be ruthless about flowery language and verbosity. Remember that it takes work to make a communication succinct and to the point. A quote from Abraham Lincoln says a lot: "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." Boil things down. The most adored passage is often also the most irrelevant.

4. REPETITION: "ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING..."

Experienced leaders and change agents find that this is the hardest part of any communication strategy – the fact that the message must be repeated, over and over and over, until they might feel sick to death of it. As George Bernard Shaw said, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished." In addition, during times of significant change, communication channels often dry up as management focuses on producing results; yet in times of uncertainty, employees are most in need of communication. If leadership is not meeting this need with credible messages, gossip and rumor often fill the vacuum.

Unfortunately, there is no rule of thumb for this – that five times should be enough, or 12 is sufficient. It requires keeping one's ear to the ground, staying connected to the current buzz, and listening to the conversations around the organization. When other people can be heard saying what is in the communication strategy like it is their own message, then it is probably enough. The best advice is always, "Create a short, compelling, consistent message – and repeat it over and over and over."

LISTEN

One way to repeat a message without literally repeating it is to ask for people's feedback and input. This is also another way to acknowledge the contributions of employees. During a period of sig-

nificant change, one executive sent out a weekly memo to keep the staff apprised of the situation, what had happened, what was coming up and what would be required of people. About once a month, he asked for people's ideas on how to handle real-life situations they were encountering, and in the next memo he would acknowledge the responses he had received. People were very glad to know that their input was solicited, and reported that they felt they had a role in the design of the organization as it morphed to accommodate the changing conditions.

III.

ONE LAST NOTE

Ultimately, what makes internal communication within organizations such a challenge is managing the fine line between truthful optimism and propaganda. People have a nose for messages that are overly positive, which can feel manipulative, especially if their view of the circumstances is not as rosy. Communication that is directed outside the enterprise is expected to put the best possible face on events. But like conversations within the family, there is a different expectation for what can and should be said to the "insiders." There is a level of honesty and authenticity called for within the family that you might not display when talking to the neighbours. The same goes for internal organizational communication. There is more permission to let things "get real." At the same time, there is also the need to develop and maintain a genuine connection through words and deeds that reinforce the relationships "at home" as it were. Well-crafted internal communications achieve that fine balance, and can be the most influential tool a leader has to encourage movement in a new and exciting direction for his or her organization.



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