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## Chapter 2

# Thinking about internal communications

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## Chapter 2

# Thinking about internal communications

This chapter will provide a framework for thinking about internal communications. If we go back to first principles and rediscover what they are, then we will make better decisions and put in place better channels for communicating with everyone throughout the workplace. So what are the basics?

### The policy and the principles

No internal communications ever succeeded without the support and commitment of strong leadership. That is where the organization's aims and many of its most important communications originate. Developing policy in consultation with them will draw them into the communications process, and win their commitment.

A policy will incorporate:

- key principles
- standards and measurement processes to monitor progress and build best practice
- channels and methods of communications
- roles, responsibilities and resources.

An internal communications plan, providing the detailed specifics and providing a framework for all involved in organizing internal communications can be built on the foundations of a tested policy.

Publishing the core principles of the policy is an important further step. The principles may be broad and few in number: for example, to advise people in a timely and appropriate manner of all change which affects them personally, to update employees continuously of key achievements and progress to key milestones, to motivate people through public recognition of performance both on a team and individual basis and to engender a climate of trust throughout the organization.

By publishing even a few principles, you establish credibility for your internal communications and allow people to judge you by whether or not you adhere to those principles.

The process of developing a policy also allows you to focus on the business benefits of internal communications, and integrate consideration of communications issues into business planning.

## Why we communicate within organizations and why we should do it better

The simple answer is of course that we are social animals and we cannot stop ourselves communicating (hence ‘the grapevine’...).

At another level there needs to be good communication to get anything done at all. The individual asks the representative of the organization (the leader, the manager, the supervisor), ‘What do you expect me to do and how do you expect me to do it?’ The leader or manager or supervisor then *informs* the individual.

Informing somebody might seem a relatively straightforward activity. But this is a two-way encounter and the result has to be understanding. This is why good communication and interpersonal skills are seen as essential for leaders and managers, for them even to begin to be effective. Our focus here is organizational communications (how the organization communicates with its members and its members communicate with the organization), but it is worth saying here that training in interpersonal skills is well established for leaders and managers, and there is increasingly sophisticated work being done on personal communication style.

Of course, the organization wants to *inform*. Just as the manager or leader informs, so the organization conveys information, which everybody needs to know, in order for it to function at all.

Only to inform, though, is to expect merely compliance and acquiescence. Contemporary internal communications work towards winning people’s participation and involvement in the enhanced achievement of the organization’s goals. If that 70 per cent of discretionary effort, already mentioned in the introduction, which is available can be engaged, then the organization is functioning at a greater capacity than before.

Involvement and participation are necessary conditions for change. Changing behavior is the ultimate goal of systematic internal communications, as organizations have to respond to constantly changing forces in the market place.

Not only the ultimate goal, but also the business discipline which requires outcomes beyond mere activity. If the communications practitioner can move from being able to state how many issues of the company newspaper were published in a given period, to knowing how many people actually read it, and then to being able to measure people's satisfaction with communication and the culture of the organization, then internal communications are producing a measurable result to set against the resources they use.

How do we know that internal communications have any effect? Organizations which have invested in internal communications over time and have monitored its effects now have a body of evidence to justify the money and effort involved. In regular surveys and questionnaires, they explore people's perceptions of internal communications and the difference they make to their attitudes to work and the organization they work for.

Apart from the effects of regular communications, the outcomes of particular campaigns can be monitored, because their aims are so specific. If the aim of a particular management initiative, in which communication plays an essential role, is to reduce employee turnover by a certain amount, then the reduction, when it comes, can be measured. If the task is to gain commitment to a restructuring of the organization, again unthinkable without communications, then surveying attitudes throughout the exercise will provide the evidence that communication is working. Wise communications professionals know the value of short, sharp focused campaigns to change attitudes and behaviors around a particular issue; they can register 'quick wins' with them, persuade others of their effectiveness and imbed internal communications into the organization.

There are other approaches to justifying effort in systematic internal communications. Large-scale benchmarking studies have demonstrated that organizations, which are successful, as measured against other criteria, attach great importance to good internal communications.

## How we communicate within organizations and the best ways of doing it

To answer these questions, we can look at what successful organizations do, as illustrated in the case studies in this report. There are also behavioral psychology and research into what people have told researchers about how they prefer to communicate at work.

Here are some factors to take into account:

- A general principle dictates that if I am to act in accordance to a new policy, or change my behavior, I must trust and believe in the person or people telling me what to do. And practice follows the same principle: in numerous studies, people say they trust and value communication with their immediate boss more than any other method.
- I am more likely to pay attention to what is being said to me if it is made clear what the impact will be on me as an individual.
- If communications of any kind, verbal, visual, behavioral, are couched in a relevant style, then I am more likely to pay attention. This principle is most obvious in terms of printed media: there is no point in producing a *Financial Times*-style newspaper for people who normally read a tabloid newspaper.
- At any one time, I have a limited attention span for communication, particularly for material which is unfamiliar.
- Unconsciously I appreciate repetition over time. It gives me many opportunities to consider what is being communicated.
- Unconsciously, I also appreciate it if I have a choice of media in which the organization is addressing me.
- I will pay a great deal more attention if I have the chance to engage with the communicator. The ability to talk about what is being communicated, to ask questions about it, and check that I have understood it is essential. It can also be fun and more likely to lead to a change in behavior than a mere recital of information by somebody else.
- What also helps me understand and learn is the re-enforcement of communication by activity.
- If I see the leaders in my organization behaving according to the principles, which they wish me to follow, I am more likely to pay attention to them.

From the above we can draw a number of conclusions:

- Face-to-face communications will be more effective than indirect methods (written documents of any kind including e-mail, video, audio and so on). Nonetheless indirect methods have an important role in supporting face-to-face communication.
- Communication is multi-faceted and does not rely on one method.
- In face-to-face communications, the most effective is likely to be between the members of a team and their immediate boss. Line managers and leaders are a key part of successful internal communications.
- There need to be respected and credible avenues for people to express their views and ask questions, to which answers should be given.
- Leaders should be visible.

## **Other characteristics of good internal communications**

So, as you focus on the business benefits of internal communications and the preferences of your audiences you begin describe what they will be like.

Your internal communications must:

- be measurable in terms of outcomes, not merely in terms of activity; and
- be two way, with scope for listening to and involving audiences, as well as addressing them.

There should be other characteristics, which can serve as indicators of how well you propose to communicate:

- Accuracy is essential. Alongside any formal system of internal communication, there is the informal at work. The grapevine is not to be despised, nor can it be eradicated, but formal systems must win respect as being proven to be more accurate time and again. Practitioners of internal communications need the status and training to be able to seek out what is accurate, and the ability and experience to tell the difference between a truth and a falsehood.

- Honesty goes hand-in-hand with accuracy. If your internal communications have a reputation for honesty in telling the whole truth as much as is possible, they will be respected. It is possible to be honest and at the same time open why it may not be possible to communicate everything. For example, when information would be share price sensitive.
- Your internal communications must take in everybody in the organization. People can understand that certain groups should be addressed in a particular way (for example, the top managers attending a special conference), but they will resent it if they feel disenfranchised. So most activity needs to reach everybody.
- Your communications must be comprehensible. We have already referred to the style in which you address people. You also need to think about how much you should be communicating, and how much contextual material you need to provide to help people appreciate the reasons for particular changes or policies.
- Your communications need to be timely. People's expectations for immediate communication have been built up to a high level by what they experience through newspapers, radio or TV, and the instantaneity of information through the Internet – e-mail and the Web.

There will be occasions too when you are working beside not only the grapevine, but also the mass media. Each element of the mass media wants to announce the news before its competitors. So where your news may be of interest to newspapers, radio and TV, you must see yourself both as a supplier of news to them, but also as a competitor with them: you must get it out first.

- Your internal communications must be prepared and delivered competently. Everybody you address is in some way aware of the highly developed skills which are applied in the mass media, in writing, graphics, photography, editing, production and so on. They are also participants at events, which are planned and performed with the greatest attention to detail: think of the experience people have at major sports events, in the theatre, at festivals and concerts, in theme parks and exhibitions.

The organization must be prepared to develop and acquire these kinds of professional skills and expertise for the deployment of its internal communications; this will include the training of people who may not think of themselves as communicators at all.

## What to communicate

The precise content of any communication of course depends on the time, the place and the organization, but you need to lay down some general principles of what to communicate, and who should decide what should be communicated.

It all starts at the top. Everybody wants to know where he or she should be going and how well they are doing in getting there. Policy and progress is decided at the top, and those at the top should state what these are, even if others, the communications specialists, are responsible for the actual communication. Wise communications specialists and top teams work together to articulate in simple language, but truthfully, what may in discussion amongst themselves be abbreviated by common assumptions or expressed in jargon.

So the top person, or the small number of people at the top, must take responsibility for the key messages which are to be broadcast through the organization. Ideally, this should be reflected in the structure of the organization. The trend in UK organizations is for communications departments, including internal communications, to have a direct line relation with chief executives. There is evidence that fewer organizations than before separate internal communications from other communications activities (PR, marketing and advertising). Now it is less common to find internal communications with the HR function, for example.

We have mentioned the need to be relevant, to provide context and to be disciplined about the quantity of internal communications. They may be regular, they may be credible, but a surfeit risks their losing their impact. Equally, it is easier for people to focus on the one or two basic reasons for a particular policy rather than try to guess which is the most important of ten or twelve. (They may also try to invalidate the policy as a whole by quibbling about one of the least important.)

The issue of 'how much?' becomes more and more pressing as organizations take advantage of digital technologies. These technologies – currently most obviously e-mail and intranets – provide solutions for problems of distribution. Because an e-mail can be delivered to a thousand people at a key stroke, it is tempting to communicate with them more frequently than via 'conventional' means – the traditional office memo, the notice-board, or the briefing system.

While being economical with information (though not with the truth), you should also in certain circumstances plan for a timetable of communication. A program of change may be anticipated to last months or even years. Communication must stay in step, with milestones set for the communication of certain messages, and checking at each stage that people have understood what has gone before.

## Measuring success

Measurement has already been mentioned as an important part of internal communications.

You should be able to measure your success in meeting the standards or the particular objectives that have been set; and the measurement will be reasonably straightforward. For instance, if you set a target that everybody should know of any development affecting their job before or at the same time as it is reported externally, then you can record what actually happens.

If the aims of a particular communications project are specific, for example to reduce employee turnover by a certain amount and by a certain date, then the measure of success lies in the comparative turnover figures.

The outcomes of a project with less tangible aims, for example to gain commitment to organizational restructure, can still be measured. The way is to keep asking a cross-section of people in the organization (large and varied enough to be statistically valid), about their levels of commitment, as you roll out the program of communication. The questions should be simple and few in number; the questioning can be done by phone or e-mail. The result will be a benchmark from the first polling, and then, as you repeat the polling, data to set against the first results. As you accumulate evidence, you can demonstrate success, and adjust your communications to what you are learning of people's response.

Setting up measurement of an organization-wide continuous internal communication presents another challenge. If systematic internal communications are to be launched, or re-launched, then research is required of two kinds, which normally takes the form of a communications audit. Firstly, you need to establish the status quo, i.e. exactly what is being done in internal communications. Many organizations, where in the past there has not been a central focus for internal communications, are surprised to find how much semi-formal communication has been going on, haphazardly and patchily.

In parallel, you must find out what people feel about the elements of internal communications, which do exist, and more generally whether they are satisfied with communications within the organization. The aim, again, is to establish a benchmark against which to set responses when you conduct similar surveys in the future.

The results of the first communications audit and subsequent surveys can be potent tools in internal communications. If you are enlisting people's help, publishing the results sends a powerful signal that their participation is appreciated and their views being taken into account as policy is being made.