

Change and Communication: You Can't Have One Without The Other

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Like most every organization in this tough economy, yours is one with challenging issues that aren't going to go away on their own. You're going to have to take real action - something purposeful and programmed to let everyone know you mean change - large scale (like a new corporate strategic focus) or more localized (such as departmental shifts.)

You realize that the first step requires you to acknowledge that change is needed - your organization's survival depends upon it. People need to know that you've got a plan for making that change happen. But the truth is, effective internal communication has never been one of your organization's strong suits. Worse yet, you may not even be certain what it is that you need to communicate or how to measure it.

What makes this problem even more alarming is that yours, like most modern organizations, seems armed to the teeth with the kind of technological instruments that are supposed to make the process of internal communication relatively easy. But too many organizations are confusing the media with the message. As a result, content often takes a back seat to speed and quantity. And neither of those elements is necessarily critical to orchestrating an effective internal communication campaign. To the contrary, speed and quantity can be what makes your message fall on seemingly deaf, if not overloaded, ears.

So, how DO you communicate to get workplace change?

Make internal communications a key element in any strategic plan requiring people to behave differently. The need for different behavior may come from a realization, for example, that service teams are not providing the results that customers value. Or, it may result from a strategic shift where certain employees have new responsibility to deliver a strengthened promise of value.

In any case, organizations should think "program and process" as they map out their internal communication effort. And while the effectiveness of your communications will depend, to a large extent, on the power of the content, the real magic will come from effective frequency and timing of the messages.

To be effective, internal communication should be tackled like any other organizational task, with a defined process and according to a relatively rigid execution schedule.

The Three-Step Staging Process

In many companies, internal communication plans are a loose collection of seemingly random communication activities. There will be a video here, an email there; perhaps a memo to all hands, or a town hall meeting. But while these activities are indeed the

activities of internal communications, results occur when these events are staged according to a simple, three-step plan.

Stage #1: Creating A State of Awareness

In any organization, absence of communication creates a crippling environment. When there is an information void, employees make up their own. And their version is usually much worse than the truth.

So, in this stage, employees are given their wakeup call. The focus is on making everyone aware of exactly what is about to be implemented, with some high level commentary on why it is important. It's a good time for sensitive bluntness.

Critical messages should be delivered by a single voice -- the leader of the executive team. Employees need to know that what they are hearing comes from management's top rung.

It's important to remember that employees respond positively to truthfulness and candor. They don't usually respond at all to what they perceive as corporate hype or management puffery. You just want them to become aware of what's going to happen and why. In each of these stages, use your full arsenal of communication instruments: the written word, creative innovations, videos, e-mail, the intranet, face time and unique ideas like conversation pits to spread awareness.

Hold focus groups and do formal surveys to determine if people are getting this first stage message. While "cascading" the information downward, from senior executives, to mid-level managers, and finally throughout the entire organization, keep in mind that important feedback must have a path back up the corporate mountain.

Stage #2: Building an Informed Workplace

At this stage employees need to understand why change is necessary and how everyone will get to the same place at the same time. Inform and educate employees as to the breadth and depth of the change. Tackle the tough cultural issues and don't downplay how difficult and demanding the change will be. Be very clear as to what's expected of each employee. It's time for the tough content.

Use similar communication tools as in Stage #1, but demand that management become even more involved in the cascade and feedback processes. Managers should observe and take part in focus groups and review survey results. Face time becomes extremely important because anxiety will be everywhere.

Rumors will spawn and multiply at warp speed if they aren't preempted. Keep in mind that one employee's perception can quickly become a co-workers truth. Have a strict schedule and stick to it. Its tightness speaks to the urgency of the entire effort.

Stage #3: Achieving Workforce Commitment

There is an obvious intensity to the communication cascade. It's reached the point where commitment is everything. Those who aren't comfortable or haven't been able to adapt to the demands for change will need to be provided with alternatives. The organization's leaders are everywhere, visible, energized and supportive of those who have climbed on board. Management needs to be engaged heavily in this final stage.

Implementation Guidelines

While the three-step staging process frames the internal communication campaign, the power is in the implementation. Following are five guidelines to help ensure your message is being heard loud and clear through the clutter.

1. **Speak With Clarity**

Avoid confusion by leaving no room for misinterpretation of your messages. Speak with a clear voice. Keep communication simple and don't attempt to pack everything into a single communication effort. At the awareness stage, your success will result from how well you are able to distill your communication into two or three well articulated and clearly defined thoughts. Avoid the "rah-rah" syndrome. Employees will rally around the organization's leadership once they understand what's expected of them and are rewarded for their efforts. Both those facets of the changing process should be clearly stated and detailed in your communication to the workplace. Spend time with managers "one on one" and assure that each understands the message the way you meant it to be understood. Take the time to be sure.

2. **Be Consistent**

Speak with a single voice and don't allow your communications to wander. The leadership team and management need to speak and act as one. Never waver. Avoid signs that can be interpreted by employees as a lack of commitment or understanding of the program. If you aren't certain of the answer to a question, don't shoot from the hip. Gather your forces and develop a collective response. Any mid-stream changes in the roadmap need to be articulated as such and the workforce needs to understand why the change is warranted. You don't want employees wondering about the competency of their leaders when much is being asked of them. Keep in mind that you communicate in both word and in deed. Employees are watching and taking their cues from both.

3. **Communicate Constantly**

Internal communication needs to be relentless and repetitive. Never assume that everyone in the workforce knows and understands. Keep the cascade cascading and repeat the key ideas and critical elements, and repeat them and then, repeat

them again. The constant nature of your communication will be a visible sign that change is underway. Constant communication will be part of your emerging workplace culture.

4. Cascade, and Cascade More

The manager that people tend to listen to and believe most is their immediate supervisor. While commitment and focus from the top is important, messages need to roll down, from the top level, to the next layer, to the next layer, to the next. Achieving cascading communications requires that you plan for it, and that you implement. Give managers the tools to tell the story consistently and well, and help them handle the basic forms of resistance they are sure to encounter. Remember too that good communication is "two way." Make it easy for employees to ask questions, provide feedback, and get answers.

5. Context and Credibility are Everything

As with all communication, understand where the "receiver" is, and how his or her biases, fears, concerns, and experiences may affect what is heard. People care about what affects them personally, in terms of job stability, pay, respect, etc. And they'll filter what they hear based on their history and experience. If they perceive that management has always been forthright and truthful, odds are they'll receive the newest information as such. If not, your communications challenge will be more significant, and you need to plan accordingly.

While a consistent, programmatic, well executed approach to internal communication should help achieve behavioral change in most of the workforce, there will undoubtedly be outliers. For these individuals, change is somehow threatening or unattractive. Perhaps they can't see organizational failure as their failure. For these people, sometimes the best answer is a public confrontation, as harsh as that may sound. When one of the brethren is selected out of the "old think" lineup, and shot publicly in the corporate town square, everyone quickly gets the message.

Our Conclusion

Behavioral change is never easy and it is never successfully accomplished without an all out internal communications program. Such a program can and should be carefully orchestrated and controlled for maximum effectiveness. Truth and candor should be the lynch pins of your effort. Leadership and management will need to speak with a single voice. It should be made clear to everyone that there will be no room in the new workplace culture for those who can't or won't make the commitment to change. Finally, the internal communications cascade should not end when the immediate goals are accomplished. An effective, vibrant and barrier- free internal communications program will in many cases be an important symbol, and measure, of the change you're seeking.