

Creating a Winning Communication Plan

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Whether you are creating a long-term communication plan to support corporate goals and objectives or creating a short-term plan to rollout a new program or announce important organizational changes, you need a winning strategy to help you get where you want to go. Here are a few tips to help you get started down the right path.

Where Are You Now?

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

Your Current Communication Environment

Once you know where you want to go, the next step is to take a fresh, honest look at your current communication environment and resources. Here are some questions you might consider:

- Do you regularly communicate with employees now? If so, are you measuring the impact of your communication?
- What is the current communication culture in your organization? (History, style, tone, etc.) Is it working?
- What are the demographics of your organization? (Age, gender, education level, positions, etc.)
- Who are your audiences for specific communication? (Consider all audiences, including corporate, field, sales, spouses, Spanish-speaking, under 30, etc.)
- Where have communication efforts not been effective in the past? Why?
- What media works well in your environment? (Print, online, face-to-face, etc.?)
- What resources do you already have to aid in the communication process? (Intranet, newsletters, voice mail, writers, graphic designers, etc.)

4430 Pebble Lake Drive

Pfafftown, NC 27040

Tel 336.924.5440

404.462.7141

Cell 336.287.5791

Fax 336.232.1701

The Communication Team

You may not have a cast of thousands, but chances are you have quite a few people involved in the communication process, from senior leadership to front line supervisors, from your internal communication team to employee representatives, from outside consultants to internal graphic staff. Here are some questions to consider:

- What are the roles each person plays?
- Who needs to be involved in the planning process?
- What are everyone's strengths and weaknesses?
- What responsibilities will each person have?
- Does everyone on the team know where you're going, how you are going to get there, what resources are available, what's expected of them, etc.?
- What are the costs associated with time efforts of each team member?

Where Are You Going?

"Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, and go on till you come to the end: then stop.
—Lewis Carroll, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

As you begin your communication journey, remember that "true north" on your traveling compass is the organization's business objectives. Ask yourself:

- What are the organization's business priorities for the year ahead?
- What does the business need people to think, feel and do to help deliver on the business objectives?
- What does senior management want organizational communication to do for them?
- How can you best serve the organization's objectives?

For example, if one of your organization's business objectives is to "develop a culture of innovation," you'll want to define (and get senior leadership input on) what an "innovative culture" looks like before you begin to craft a communication strategy. Or, if your communication objective is to inspire employees to take charge of their health, determine what that will look like. Will your objective be achieved if after one year

60% of employees participate in a health assessment program and 80% of employees read the company health newsletter (as determined through a readership survey)?

In short, be specific about your objectives and create a way to measure success.

What's the Best Way to Get There?

"Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising which tempt you to believe that your critics are right.

To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires courage."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Once you have a strategy and have defined clear, specific objectives for success, it's time to determine the best way to get where you want to go. You'll want to define:

- **Messages.** What messages do you want employees to receive? Do you have different messages for different audiences? (Management, spouses/families of employees, those nearing retirement, etc.)
- **Timing.** When do you announce the campaign/project? What's the best way to roll out information so employees won't feel overwhelmed? Remember that you will likely need to repeat key messages—over and over—before they "stick."
- **Media.** There are a multitude of ways to communicate to employees today: print (newsletters, brochures, handbooks, posters, etc.), audio (CDs, podcasts), video, voice mail, intranet, bulletin boards, brown bag discussions, blogs, on-line with the president, walking around, grapevine power, and meetings (to name a few). What works best in your environment? How do you know?
- **Budget.** There are lots of communication options, and you want to make the best use of your communication dollars. Examine the cost of each element of your strategy. Put a higher value on activities that have been shown to work in your environment.

Test the Waters

“Look before you leap.” —Aesop

When you create a new communication strategy, it's smart to test the waters before you jump in. One way is to create an employee task force from the beginning to provide input on the strategy each step of the way. Another is to conduct focus groups to assess employee (and specific audiences) responses to graphic identity, messages, media, etc. Focus groups engage participants in collaborative thinking and provide in-depth, qualitative feedback. They also demonstrate an organization's commitment to employees that their opinions matter. And, when used to test communication, focus groups can keep you out of treacherous waters.

A case in point: One of our clients, a national media company that included television and radio broadcasting and multiple newspapers, had created a strategy introducing significant changes in their benefit program. The client (on orders from senior management) had created a sleek, eye-catching graphic look for their campaign and planned to roll out the changes gradually over a period of several months in bite-size pieces. We convinced them to hold focus groups to test the communication with a variety of employee audiences, including their toughest audience, reporters from newspapers and television. To give you the condensed version of the focus group results: employees hated the polished graphic look and they detested the roll-out strategy of the campaign, interpreting it as hiding bad news. They wanted to know “what, where, when, how, and why” and they wanted the whole story up front—no secrets, no surprises. We scrapped the planned communication and created a straightforward strategy, no gloss, with direct information from senior management and from their direct supervisors (whom they trusted). Printed materials presented the “bottom line” up front and included photos and testimonials of actual employees and their families, discussing how the changes would affect them and the choice they might make. In this instance, focus groups prevented potentially disastrous (and widespread) results.

Should We Take a New Route Next

Time?

“It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

Measuring the effectiveness of your strategy among the different stakeholders (senior management, your team, employees, etc.) during and after implementation is how you learn to create better strategies for the future. It's important to track your successes, challenges and failures to find out what works and doesn't work in your environment.

There are many ways to measure your results, including qualitative and quantitative research, anonymous and focus group feedback, business results, employee satisfaction and retention rates, and so on. Measuring results helps you legitimize the value of your communication efforts and identify what needs to be done going forward. During the planning process, you already defined your objectives and what “success” will look like, and created a plan to measure your progress. Now is the time to assess your efforts, integrate key learnings and new insights—and incorporate them into your communication roadmap!