

Memo to Management

Are Your Employees “Working With The Volume Off?”

Strategies to capture people’s attention, keep them engaged and increase organizational performance

Just when organizations have made improving relationships with employees a priority, they’ve encountered an interesting, sobering reality – employees aren’t listening.

For decades, internal communications often has been perceived as a “feel good” or “soft” area for organizations. Through the years, the necessity for leaders to strengthen relationships with employees has risen to the point that it is now a pillar of competitive advantage.

Today, an uninformed workforce can spell disaster for any organization attempting to navigate through the treacherous waters of global business.

To that end, a number of CEOs have placed a spotlight on internal communications as a strategic means to change and drive the organization. Unfortunately, the result has mostly been a flurry of activity around traditional communications tactics and mechanisms – newsletters, Web sites, meetings and e-mails as well as technologically sophisticated internal media, resulting in a flood of data raining down on employees, most of which lacks the relevance and context necessary to affect behavior and performance. The distressing truth is that leaders believe they are “communicating,” and communicators are certainly keeping busy with the mechanics of communicating, but employees have responded by tuning out the “noise” and focusing only on the picture, that is, responding only to what they see happening around them.

In reality, what organizational leadership needs to accomplish in order to drive change is to capture employee attention and to ensure every person in the organization understands that they largely control the company’s success or failure, as it is determined by how every employee thinks, what they focus on and how they execute their responsibilities on a daily basis.

The inside view: too much data = too much noise

These days, ringing cell phones disturb our peace in the most unlikely places. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of e-mails fill our electronic mailboxes every day. Pagers beep. Advertising messages invade every corner of our aural and visual space. Sometimes, it all makes you just want to put in earplugs and sit quietly in the dark.

If you have ever felt that way yourself, imagine how your employees must feel when they are inundated daily with an overwhelming amount of data. According to a recent study, technology and new communications media has added to organizational noise because it has not displaced older communications mechanisms. Rather, it is layered over existing systems thereby substantially

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increasing the message load. As the study points out, e-mails, PDAs, cell phones, electronic newsletters, video conferences, chat rooms and corporate intranets did not replace snail mail, telephones, answering machines, faxes, bulletin boards, printed newsletters and voicemail.

Fill those channels and mechanisms with a dizzying array of “feel-good” or change-directed messages and you can find yourself in a truly catatonic state.

A *Los Angeles Times* survey suggests that workers send and receive an average of 178 messages each day through voicemail, e-mail, fax and PDA. The most frequent tools were telephone (24 messages a day), e-mail (14 a day) and voicemail (11 a day). Additionally, the majority of surveyed employees said their work was interrupted by messages at least three times an hour, with knowledge workers citing interruptions every five minutes. It’s hard to imagine when employees find time to do their jobs. They complain of:

- ◆ Having difficulty managing and storing that flood of information.,
- ◆ Being unable to easily separate urgent from nonessential data.,
- ◆ Misplacing or losing track of key items in the growing piles of data they are expected to review.,
- ◆ Finding the glut of information a distraction from their primary responsibilities.,
- ◆ Taking work home or staying late to catch up., and
- ◆ Attributing information overload to deteriorating personal relationships.

Additionally, a *Reuters Business Information* survey of 1,300 managers finds a majority of employees attribute ill health and stress directly to the crushing amount of information they are expected to handle, resulting in low job satisfaction.

Alas, despite everything we’ve learned about strategic communications over the past two decades, many corporations can be compared to stubborn patients who refuse to see their doctors despite knowing better. What’s worse in this case is that the communications counselor is too often compliant, willing to continue focusing on the latest technology (e.g. blogs, quarterly financial announcements and corporate videos) while the organization’s very viability is under threat.

Now, more than ever, corporations and the communicators who advise these organizations must once and for all break out of the old, limiting models of behavior and instead, recognize that communications only makes a significant difference when it’s consultative and initiatory – not tactical and reactive.

Rhetoric vs. reality

Just as some football fans watch Monday Night Football with the volume off to escape the incessant blather posing as commentary and insights, employees are watching, but choosing not to listen. They look for visual cues and pay attention to what’s going on around them as company information raises questions rather than answering them. For instance, employees may hear or read in a company publication about a new initiative that realigns the way things are done. But then they see leadership or their managers operating in the same manner as they always have. What’s

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the real message for them? Is the company embarking on a new paradigm, or not? “Probably not,” employees say to one another. The result is widespread cynicism instead of the enthusiasm and commitment that business organizations need in order to grow and thrive.

Against this backdrop, is it any wonder that employees are working with the volume off? For many, it has become a self-defense mechanism, tuning it all out because they have no choice if they are to get their jobs done. Yet there’s no denying that there are critical messages that your employees must receive – particularly the critical need for employees to understand, embody and act on the company’s strategy.

A startling fact uncovered in recent surveys indicates that a low percentage of the workforce, including managers and supervisors, understand the company’s strategy, and that leadership is aghast at that fact. This knowledge deficiency among managers is a serious problem, because these are the very people who must drive the strategy.

So how do you cut through the clutter and noise to assure that the messages are received, understood and acted on?

Quality vs. quantity

From a communications perspective employees are looking for information that will help them better manage and execute their responsibilities. They want to do their part to help the company survive and thrive so that they can keep their jobs, send their children to college, pay their mortgages and feel good about their lives. Yet leadership, with misguided counsel from communicators, tend to misuse internal communications channels and mechanisms and “talk at” employees about strategy – creating noise – rather than engaging employees and managers in a dialogue about strategic intent. This would provide them the opportunities to interpret the strategy and apply it on a macro level as a broad guiding principle as well as on a micro level that guides individual job execution on a daily basis.

In his 2005 best seller, “Blink,” Malcolm Gladwell tells a story about a US military war game maneuver that fully illustrates that an overwhelming amount of information can be a true disadvantage. According to Gladwell, the Blue Team used the latest technology to collect up-to-the-minute data regarding the position and movements of its enemy, the Red Team. The sheer mass of information caused paralysis as Blue Team leaders used too much valuable time gathering and examining all the data and determining how it fit together before they made decisions about next moves and troop mobilization. On the other side, the Red Team had a rudimentary communications system and used it only to convey leadership’s strategic intent, leaving field commanders to their own initiative and creativity to move forward in concert with the strategy. Needless to say, the Red Team won the maneuver. Yet, at the conclusion of the game the Blue Team still stood by its communication system, never seeing it was mired in important but irrelevant information.

The lesson applied to internal communications is for leaders to recognize that a real competitive advantage can only be gained through an engaged, motivated, knowledgeable and respected workforce.

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What does this mean for senior management and communicators who understand this paradigm? It means they should stop using tired clichés like teamwork, loyalty and empowerment. Instead of acting as though the employees' volume is still on, leadership should focus on what employees are really concerned about: job discretion, respect, privacy, recognition and reward.

Discover vs. sell

To capture employees' attention when the volume is down, we have to adopt a “discover” approach rather than a “sell” approach, meaning the most effective communication is when people discover for themselves leadership's strategic intent. In this regard, communications can help employees experience the necessary changes and the benefits of new corporate initiatives needed to drive organizational strategy. Initiatives, in this vein, are owned by employees rather than viewed as an ever changing “flavor of the month.”

In the example below, we've outlined the difference between a discover vs. sell approach for an organization introducing a new corporate strategy:

A sell approach addresses employees as a homogeneous audience and typically includes the following actions:

- ◆ Theme adapted, brochure produced, coffee mugs and/or screensavers given to all employees;
- ◆ CEO sends e-mail to all employees and an article about the new strategy appears in the employee newsletter and on the intranet;
- ◆ Information packets given to all managers telling them what to say to their teams;
- ◆ Cascading of information sought.

Result: Noise, but no action

The discover approach segments internal audiences, develops and delivers critical messages based on who needs to know what and when, and typically includes:

- ◆ Strategy development sessions with leaders and management detailing marketplace realities, competitive issues, etc;
- ◆ Current feedback on employee attitudes, issues, behaviors factored into planning;
- ◆ Communication channels are peppered with information on the marketplace, competition and its impact on the company, kept relevant to employee reality;
- ◆ Major external article on organizational shift;
- ◆ Briefing sessions on strategy with managers, supervisors and union leaders;
- ◆ CEO briefing with leaders, managers and supervisors;
- ◆ CEO directive to functional heads to prioritize plans and get budgets in line with the new strategy; and
- ◆ “Immersion days” held for all employees by function to make strategy relevant.

Result: Knowledge, discussion, debate, insight, confidence

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In the latter, more effective approach, communications provides context for decisions. In that sense, all communications should answer the following questions for employees:

- ◆ What has the company learned? Why does management feel the need to take this particular action?
- ◆ How does this action align with the company's business strategy or vision for the future?
- ◆ How does this action affect what I see?
- ◆ How does this action affect me and how I execute my responsibilities?

Messages mirror behavior and actions

Regardless of one's management responsibilities, we must all see ourselves and operate as communicators. As such, we must seek to make an impact on what employees see, rather than merely the messages they hear. We must help employees understand and believe through experiential techniques (e.g., discover vs. sell). And we must encourage employee engagement with the company on an emotional level.

Let employees see how senior management shares the challenge of cost containment and cost reduction. Let them see how leadership treats customers with respect. Let them feel passionate about the brand. Let them see how the organization handles crises, puts values into action and translates strategy into financial performance.

Being attentive

At a time when employees have tuned out the traditional rhetoric of organizational communications, leaders and communicators alike must recalibrate their approach to reach people and engage them in the business.

Being attentive to employees, observing what they respond and react to, accepting their ideas, suggestions and criticisms, engaging them in the decision-making process and allowing them to discover the priorities and changes necessary to drive the business forward will result in a more effective, efficient enterprise. This certainly is a more meaningful stimulus to get the best out of individuals and teams within our organizations. ◆

**“What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson**

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