

Five Ways to Close the Employee Communications Gap

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The shifting nature of work and workplace dynamics require thoughtful attention to effective internal communications. More limited face-to-face interactions, an increasingly diverse workforce, mobile technology that can result in weakened interpersonal connections: all of these have made communications more complex. The complexity becomes more acute when an organization embarks on a change initiative, during which effective communication becomes critical.

According to IBM's 2008 "Making Change Work" study, which examined 1,500 social and private sector organizations worldwide, the number one most significant challenge organizations faced when managing change is "changing mindsets and attitudes." When the same group rated what made certain change initiatives successful, 70 percent cited "honest and timely communication" as a critical success factor.

There's no shortage of research on why change efforts *don't succeed*, but one specific root cause that doesn't get much press—and can be a powerful accelerator if you get it right—is the role the internal communications function plays in driving change. Internal communications doesn't get discussed much for several reasons. For one, the function is not typically elevated to the strategic level, leaving stakeholders to view it as more of a tactical function in the organization. At the same time, many nonprofits don't have the funds to invest in a formal communications program, and it gets left up to the senior leaders or others to handle it. Despite the fact that it is not always seen as strategic or formal—or very exciting—the internal communications function is a lynchpin in the change management process.

This played out recently in our work with a large development organization that was undergoing a shift in strategy. The client devoted so much time to positioning and communicating the changes externally, that staff members—closest to the work—were out of the loop and not aligned on the impact of these changes. Talented employees began to leave because, in the absence of information, people were fearful they would not have a job. Leaders were sharing different levels of (sometimes inaccurate) detail that resulted in

confusion and mistrust of management. Because “change” equals “loss” to many people, morale was at an all-time low.

These consequences helped persuade the organization to strengthen its internal communications function by first identifying how the change would affect *individuals* in the organization, not just the organization as a whole. Establishing an authentic line of communication to acknowledge feelings, empathize with challenges, and speak the truth created more trusted relationships with the very people responsible for sustaining the change. The organization hired a more experienced leader, focused on building an inspiring and relevant *internal* narrative, and integrated communication efforts across the organization. These visible actions ultimately improved employee morale, retention, and client satisfaction indicators.

Today, effectively communicating your story of change faces increasing challenges—from generational dynamics to information overload in all aspects of our lives. And these challenges provoke those responsible for internal communications to rethink the “who, when, and how” of communicating information. In spite of these challenges, we’ve discovered through work with a number of nonprofit clients that there are five key actions organizations can take to ensure internal communications helps advance buy-in for change:

1. Share the responsibility

When it comes to communicating change, more often than not the responsibility falls on the shoulders of a group of individuals specifically tasked with managing communications. While many assume that the primary responsibility should lie with this group of people, they are not the necessarily the right—or only—people to take the lead on communicating change.

The truth is that when you unpack the work of the internal communications *function*, you discover that there are bits and pieces of it everywhere. Communicating change should be a *shared* responsibility, and in order to figure out who should be doing what, you need to understand where the work is being performed across the organization. Once you have that “systems view” of internal communications, you will find that redistributing responsibilities is fundamental to designing your internal communications approach.

2. Know who you’re talking to

Once you’ve tapped into a dynamic team made up people from different parts of the organization and have clearly defined their roles in successfully communicating the organizational change, you need to turn your attention to your audiences. While your audience may be made up entirely of internal staff, there are likely many subsets of that group based on things such as demographics, culture, location, organizational level, function, etc. All of these characteristics affect how people will understand and be affected by change, as well as how they take in the information they are given and how they will respond.

By understanding the various profiles of your audience, you can address issues such as where people fit into the change, how/if their roles will change, and how they will be supported during the change. To be sure your messages will resonate, choose a few representatives to review and provide feedback before sending these messages to a broader audience.

3. Be savvy about technology

A Pew Research analysis of the 2015 US workforce population shows that millennials comprise approximately 35 percent of the workforce.¹ At the same time, Gen Z is just maturing into the workforce. Though different in many ways, these two generations share a digital existence, and are used to digesting information in real-time using news apps and social media.

Today's workplaces are made up of multiple generations working side by side—forms of communication that work for some, might not work for others. Our experience tells us that it's important to allow for more two-way, real-time communications, as well as easier access to content. Not every generation appreciates hearing about important aspects of organizational change through collaboration and knowledge tools like Slack. Again, the key is to know the audience and use the right technologies that will help you connect with them best.

4. Keep it real

Organizations risk losing support for the change required by coming across as not telling the whole truth—the good *and* the bad. Be authentic, honest, and transparent in your messaging. This does not mean telling everything to all people at the same time, however. It does mean being clear about what you can and can't share, and why, and delivering facts. It requires striking a balance between providing enough information to dispel rumor and unnecessary fear and avoiding the trap of sugarcoating real information.

Another pitfall for many organizations is overcomplicating the message and overwhelming the audience. Keep it short—net out the key messages so your audience doesn't have to work hard to understand the bottom line. If the change initiative is complex in nature, stage and break up the flow into bite-sized pieces that are less likely to obfuscate and frustrate. Use imagery, employ good storytelling techniques, and illustrate metrics, where possible, to help audiences grasp the key concepts and make it easier for the variety of people delivering the messaging to do so in a consistent way.

5. Pay attention to timing

Far too many organizations engage and communicate with employees too late—essentially waiting until the changes they're proposing are essentially a *fait accompli*. Failing to bring all your stakeholders to the table from the very beginning opens the door for a lot of misunderstanding and, in the absence of information, the making up of inaccurate stories.

Effective communications should be delivered at regular intervals, even when there is no new news. Consider optimal scheduling (e.g., being sensitive to time differences across geographies) and other organizational communications in order to prevent overload. Providing a timeline for when the next update will come will help better manage expectations of what is coming next.

¹ Fry, Richard. "Millennials surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in U.S. labor force," Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/> (accessed August 2017).

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Change initiatives often falter for two reasons. First, leaders are not focused on *change at the individual level*—from addressing behaviors to understanding the loss people experience. Second, the *case for change* does not get made strongly enough or get communicated sufficiently to *all* stakeholders, resulting in confusion about the work, competing priorities, and decreased productivity.

As a broker of trust, builder of belief, and a champion for cultivating culture, the role and value of internal communications is truly underestimated. The work it performs does not sit in one department. Strategically targeting audiences, using the right methods in a timely manner, and speaking the truth keeps employees engaged and in the game. And when internal communications is doing its job, employees end up being in tune with the organization's direction, what's in it for them, and why it all matters.



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