



Best Practices in Employee Communications and Engagement



INTRODUCTION

Let's face it – when it came to communications teams, the employee communications function used to be at the low end of the totem pole. To work in employee communications was to be in a junior role, away from the important stuff and dis-connected from where the real action took place.

Today, employee communications and engagement is recognized as a critical function. It is not only central to any successful communications or marketing campaign, it is also fundamental to organizational performance.

Quite simply, a lack of efficient employee communications costs organizations – it represents a net drain on time, money and effectiveness. Worse, gaps in internal communications expose companies to risks in missed opportunity or dis-connected messages to stakeholders and audiences.

The business case for employee communications and engagement is now clear. The question remains – what's the most strategic approach to the function?

PRINCIPLES

The following principles will help shape an organization's approach to crafting an employee communications and engagement program that is fit-for-purpose.

Integrate employee communications in all external communications. It's important to build internal communications into all external campaigns in an integrated, coherent fashion. Employee communications is not a ghettoized function separated from the organization – it should be at the heart of all external or stakeholder communications. This is the critical first step in driving alignment, and communicating in a consistent and authentic fashion.

Walk the talk. High performance internal communications can only take root in an organization that truly embraces the importance of the work, and functions in a way that demonstrates that commitment. Open communication and a commitment to sharing information should be implicit and explicit in day-to-day operations and expectations for team behaviours.

Consider culture. The pivot point for transformative employee communications is culture. An internal culture should be deliberately defined and cultivated in order to create conditions in which employee communication can flourish. The internal culture will be built from the constellation of several large and small dimensions, such as the way in which meetings take place, habits in terms of interpersonal relations, patterns for email writing and distribution, the form and function of strategic planning sessions and the way in which the organization responds to challenges and opportunities. Building culture should be a thoughtful, careful and collaborative exercise that is nurtured over time.

Pay attention to managers. When planning internal communications activities, pay particular attention to the management community. Consider that managers have two key roles in any employee communications initiative – they are at once *receivers* of information and *vehicles* to communicate messages to their teams. This structural reality should be addressed in the design and execution of internal communications.

Design internal communications around the employees, not the organization. Too often, employee communication is driven exclusively by organizational imperatives – what the company wants to communicate and how the CEO wants to be positioned. These are important, but secondary considerations. To be relevant, employee communications has to map tightly to employees’ needs and interests. Think less about the CEO’s message in the newsletter and more about day-to-day considerations like parking policies and suggestions to improve the cafeteria.

Focus on authenticity. Fundamentally to be credible and useful, internal communications must be authentic. Authenticity can be achieved by having leaders speak in their own voice, being transparent even when the news is difficult, and most importantly, in demonstrating that the organization empowers employees to speak truth to power.

BEST PRACTICES

#1: Develop a strategy.

Employee communications is too important to leave to chance. It’s critical to develop a strategy to focus internal communications activities by setting clear objectives that track to measurable, observable outcomes. In particular, consider how internal communication will integrate with external communications and branding.

#2: Demonstrate executive leadership.

Visible buy-in and engagement at the top is essential. Ensure that the head of your organization is fully briefed on internal communications, has an opportunity to shape the strategy and is front and centre in outreach activities. This is important not only as the CEO is a key communications channel, but also because his or her behaviour will help set expectations for transparency and authenticity. Consider opportunities to demonstrate a real commitment to information sharing, in order to illustrate that information hoarding is not acceptable within your organization’s performance or culture.

#3: Avoid the vacuum effect.

Don’t be fooled into thinking that if you don’t communicate, nothing will be said. Quite the contrary – internal communication abhors a vacuum. If there is change afoot or a challenge coming, the grapevine will be abuzz. The longer you leave the informal channels to be the only viable source of information, the harder it will be to establish relevance and trust.

#4: Resource appropriately.

External communications always trumps internal when it comes to budgeting of financial and staff resources. Consider that there is a real cost to this pattern – what does it cost you every day in lost productivity that your team is not clear on its direction? That directorates don’t share information? What are the risks in having your front line staff convey incorrect or off-target messages to clients and customers every day? The only way to excel at the employee communication function is to resource it appropriately. Make a commitment to avoid the “robbing Peter to pay Paul” syndrome that is all too common in the perennial struggle to balance internal and external communication investments.

#5: Focus on face-to-face.

Wherever possible and practical, employee communication should take place face-to-face. In-person exchanges are the most effective and trusted forms of internal communication. What's more, that direct conversation can also unravel otherwise effective communications activities such as newsletters and intranet content if the spokesperson fails to establish trust or authenticity. Design communication strategies and tactics around meaningful opportunities for face-to-face exchange. If distance is a challenge, explore the use of web conferences as a means of bridging that geographical gap rather than relying on the passive and cold medium of email.

#6: Think about systems.

Consider that the sphere of internal communication is pervasive across an organization. It is not just about specific tactics or meetings – the way in which the organization communicates internally is manifest across several touch points, such as processes, approval channels, cultural patterns, social norms and business systems. What messages are being conveyed through the systems of your organization? Is that message deliberately engineered, or is it being left to chance?

#7: Your Intranet won't save you.

There is an almost universal belief that fixing the Intranet will fix internal communications. That is a false and dangerous assumption – effective employee communication cannot be based on any single tactic. An Intranet can and should be a powerful tool in consolidating business resources and information, functioning as an electronic convenor for the employee community. However, the Intranet must be integrated within a broader tactical mix, which includes channels such as face-to-face opportunities, communication via managers as well as informal avenues for information and exchange.

#8: Measure, learn, refine.

Measurement is always important in strategic communications, but it may be especially relevant in the case of employee communication. Setting up clear indicators of performance will be vital in calibrating the strategy and tactics with appropriate precision. Internal communication may be deployed to track against outcomes such as morale, retention, recruitment, productivity, job satisfaction and/or employee safety. Being clear about "what success looks like," and establishing internal alignment around that end state is instrumental to having high impact employee communication programs that deliver results.

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