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Managing Communications

COMMUNICATIONS: EASY TO TALK ABOUT, CHALLENGING TO MANAGE

George Bernard Shaw put it best: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Managing communications is one of those "soft" skills demanded by organizations that want to succeed. The bad news: communications cannot be effectively managed with a haphazard, "How difficult can it be?" approach. The good news: a little bit of communications management rigor goes a long, long way.

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGEMENT MODEL

Six sequential steps define a comprehensive model for effectively managing communications within your organization. Here are the six steps and their key activities:

1. Communications Strategies
    Determining the objectives of the communications program; identifying stakeholders.
2. Stakeholder Expectations
    Developing stakeholder engagement tactics.
3. Audience Analysis
    Organizing audiences by function, geography, or other logical groupings.
4. Key Messages
    Developing message content in support of the program's strategic objectives; aligning messages with audiences.
5. Communications Events
    Developing a detailed communications plan outlining each event and its preparation.
6. Feedback
    Determining communications assessment tactics.

1. COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

"Like a human being, a company has to have an internal communication mechanism, a 'nervous system', to coordinate its actions." Bill Gates

Putting the time in up front determining the objectives of your communications program will pay off for the life of the project. Your objectives must align well with the overall strategies of the business. It will also be helpful to evaluate the results of any relevant past communications programs and practices so you can apply lessons learned and avoid repeating past mistakes.

The strategy phase includes identifying the program's stakeholders, securing the requisite dollars and time budgets for everyone involved and making sure the program complies with any company brand policies that are in place. Finally, this stage is the best time to outline the program's feedback requirements and success measures.

2. STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

"You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your ideas won't get you anywhere." Lee Iacocca

When you find yourself fighting fires day in and day out it is easy to skip this very important stage: detailing the expectations of your communication program's stakeholders. Take a look at your program from their point of view. What are their concerns? What are the implications if your program does not address those concerns?
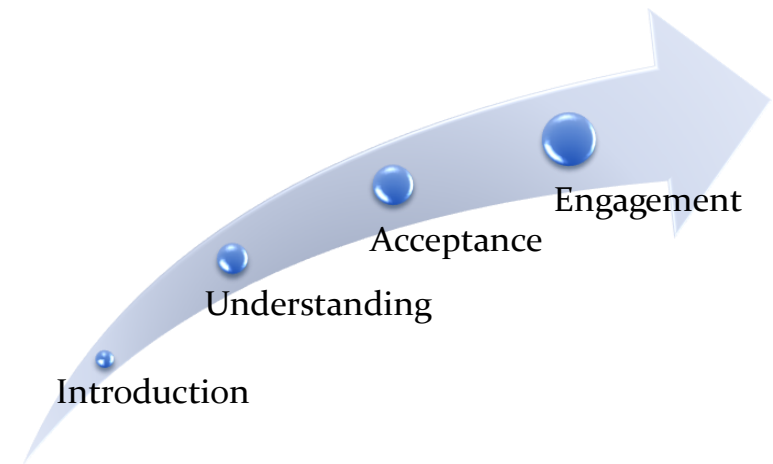
And don't let this analysis discourage you. Effort here will clarify who your advocates, agents and targets are. Developing engagement tactics (activities, timing, and success measures) will make sure you stay on top of managing stakeholder expectations.

3. AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

"If you have nothing to say, say nothing." Mark Twain

Take a step back and look at who across the program will be receiving communications. Organizing these audiences by function, geography or other logical group is your first effort during this phase. Then identify each audience's primary, secondary and tertiary communications vehicles.

A vital part of this phase is determining each audience's current and target position on the Engagement Pathway:

Engagement

Acceptance

Understanding

Introduction

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4. Key Messages

"It's not about the messenger. It's about the message." Dalai Lama

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Mark Twain

At this stage, with the stakeholders and audiences clearly identified, you are ready to develop the message content which supports the program's strategic objectives. The messages need to be aligned with each audience group. You need to accommodate each audience's progress along the Engagement Pathway as the program moves forward, as well.

5. Communications Events

"If I am to speak ten minutes, I need a week for preparation; if fifteen minutes, three days; if half an hour, two days; if an hour, I am ready now." Woodrow Wilson

You are now (finally!) ready to develop a detailed communications plan which outlines each event, be it a meeting, an email, a public announcement, a conference call, a newsletter article, a celebration or whatever.

The plan also needs to lay out the preparation and approval steps required for each event. This plan will be a living document, regularly updated to be sure you are on top of what needs to happen next.

6. Feedback

"Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress." Mahatma Gandhi

"Listening, not imitation, may be the sincerest form of flattery." Dr. Joyce Brothers

This final stage is one that you may be tempted to gloss over, or skip altogether. "I'm too busy chopping wood to sharpen the saw," can seem inevitable when fighting daily battles. Skip this step at the program's peril. Determine whether surveys or group meetings (or both) will be your method for measuring how well your plan is working. Plan on listening to what people say about your communications program and adjust the plan accordingly.

Key Success Factors

Communications are easy to talk about but challenging to manage. As you add the rigor of the six steps above to the "soft" skill of communications management, several other factors will be key to your success:

- Putting ample time and energy into planning
- Knowing and nurturing program stakeholders
- Respecting where people are on the Engagement Pathway and how messaging moves them
- Committing fully to gathering and acting on audience feedback.

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