Developing a Communications Strategy

Table of Contents

www.stellarleadership.com

Introduction

"The first principle is that you must not fool yourself…and you are the easiest person to fool."[1] This is a first principle worth noting when embarking on any serious review of your organisations communication processes. It will inevitably mean facing up to changes in the way that you and the organisation behaves and getting people to change behaviour is very difficult. As Mark Twain famously said, "I'm all for progress; it's change I don't like".

This paper challenges some of the conventional wisdom on organisational communication and moves to guide you towards a modern and interactive approach.

Management Approaches to Communication

We cannot not communicate.   Even doing nothing sends out a message. Communication is a process by which we exchange information and share meanings. The problem for organisations is managing messages and meaning so that every individual has all the knowledge and understanding he/she needs to get the results expected of them and in a way that leaves them feeling informed, involved and motivated.

In challenging conventional wisdom we draw on research that shows how managers have grown over the years to approach communication. It highlights how we have moved to change our underlying assumptions to address the more complex needs associated with people employed in knowledge-based industries and in a modern, technologically driven age.   The research describes how approaches to communication have developed in three ways[2] as indicated in the table overleaf.

---

[1] Nobel Laurate, Richard Feynman (Physicist)
[2] Clampitt P, Managing for Managerial Effectiveness (2003)

Approach	Description	Underlying Assumptions
1. Arrow In short, the Arrow approach is much like taking aim and firing arrows of communication at a target.	This requires managers to: • be able to clearly and precisely put thoughts into words • speak with credibility and authority • get the desired results by talking to others.	• what is clear and precise to one person is clear and precise to another • credibility is something the speaker processes and not something given by the audience • communication is primarily a one-way activity.
2. Circuit In short, the Circuit approach is like an electrical circuit which uses networks, goes with the flow and makes connections.	This requires managers to: • listen to people • show sensitivity and openness by adapting messages to individuals • make people feel included and understood.	• satisfaction is the goal of communication • messages are interpreted based on interpersonal relationships • openness is useful in all circumstances • understanding will lead to agreement • understanding is the primary goal and is always more acceptable than ambiguity.
3. Dance In short, the Dance approach involves patterns, movement and creativity. Participants as well as observers can enjoy it and there are as many styles as people. Once performed, it can never be recaptured in the same way.	This requires managers to: • see patterns and unwritten rules • consider the need for co-orientation between individuals as well as departments • change communication medium according to goal and context.	• communication involves the coordination of meanings rather than meanings having to be shared • communication needs co-orientation: sensing and anticipating the needs and reactions of others • we can simultaneously orient to each other, even as positions constantly change • ground rules or rules-of-thumb are necessary to assist interpretation and meaning.

In summary, the **Arrow** approach fails to recognise that effective communication is a shared commitment between senders and receivers.

The **Circuit** approach fails to recognise that understanding does not always equal effective communication in that it does not always lead to agreement and indeed ambiguity about issues can be useful when it allows divergent groups to work together.

The Arrow focuses on producing the best possible message and the Circuit looks at the meanings imposed by listeners. Each is worthy in the right circumstances however there may be a better point of view called the Dance.

The **Dance** approach recognises the complexities in the apparent simplicity of communication. Even the simplest dance involves thousands of intricate manoeuvres. This is also true of communication. It is concerned with patterns and unwritten rules. It is not exclusively concerned with relationships nor immediate results but seeks sustained success. It sees communication as a dance between partners who are interdependent and energised by active engagement. This

Content and Context

Based on this thinking, there are seven broad propositions about communication that will inform a communication strategy:

1. Communication is about probability: it is as likely to be misinterpreted as interpreted if not properly thought out[3]

2. Context is an important element in removing ambiguity and misinterpretation

3. Context building is a dynamic process and is constantly changing

4. Context can cloud all other means of communication as for example when someone is angry and stops listening, or when behaviour is at odds with words spoken, or when events in one area have an impact on another

5. The way we construct and sequence communication can affect meaning i.e. how and when we choose to say, show or write things

6. There are multiple messages in every communication event and people's understanding comes less from words (only 7%) and more (93%) from non-verbal elements

7. Communication content and context interact to produce meaning and so we need to always take both into account.

Looking at the implications of this we can infer the following table overleaf.

---

[3] There are over 14,000 definitions for the 500 most frequently used words in the English language.

What We Already Know	Implications for Action
The more we know about the context in which people interpret actions and messages the greater likelihood that they can accurately predict the possible interpretations	Get out and about. Learn about attitudes, environment, needs, desires of target audiences for communication. An audit of key stakeholders will help with this process.
We need to be able to manage expectations	We need to understand others' expectations and not rely on our own as a benchmark. This is akin to the customer focus philosophy underpinning quality assurance.
Think about possible interpretations (and misinterpretations) of messages, events and symbols	Think, 'how might this be understood' as well as how best to structure and present a message to get a point across. Lessen the probability that it will be misinterpreted. And, be open to the idea that deliberate ambiguity may well at times serve a purpose.
Clarify potential ambiguity by also pointing to what is not being said	Clarify precise meaning by sometimes saying "I do not mean…" and therefore showing sensitivity to other potential interpretations.
Pay attention to secondary messages	Be conscious of non verbal or unintended messages that detract from the main message.
Be aware of the "law of large numbers"	The bigger the audience the more likely that someone or some group will misinterpret, even if the vast majority understand the message clearly, as intended. It is not a perfect art.
Carefully frame messages	Messages need to be framed or put in context so that receivers are able to choose one particular meaning(s) over another. This is to assert our interpretation over other possible interpretations. By framing we put the communication in a context that, if carefully crafted, gives credibility and meaning to our communication, especially where it is bad news being delivered.
Communication is a complex leadership function that requires attention, skill and will	Managers will almost certainly benefit from skills development work to improve personal competence in the area of communication.

Communication is full of uncertainties that do not sit well with certain types of people (who like certainty). It is a much more fluid and dynamic process than may seem comfortable. It requires effort and constant attention in a changing environment. It won't happen without attention, resource allocation and personal development. It is better to be realistic about this: better to be effective than to be efficient without desired results.

Next Steps Towards a Communication Strategy

A communication strategy needs to be based on a hierarchy of communication goals that, in order of difficulty (from easy to hard), might include: informing; inspiring; coordinating; and educating a target audience.

Some of the key questions we must ask in drawing up a strategy will be:

1. Objectives:
   What are we are trying to achieve and what change do we seek?

2. Stakeholder/Audience Groups:
   Who can contribute to the change needed and who will be affected by the change?

3. Stakeholder Analysis:
   What are their attitudes, beliefs/opinions and knowledge needs/gaps?

4. Messages:
   What messages need to be highlighted and for which stakeholders

5. Channels/Methods:
   How can we best get the attention, interest and understanding of stakeholders and influence them – do we need multiple channels?

6. Timing:
   How long will it take to change opinions or for messages to be understood; when do we start; how do we sequence messages; and are there any obvious opportunities through pre-programmed events etc.?

7. Plan:
   what are we going to do, for whom and how?

8. Evaluation:
   how will we know if we have achieved our communication objectives?
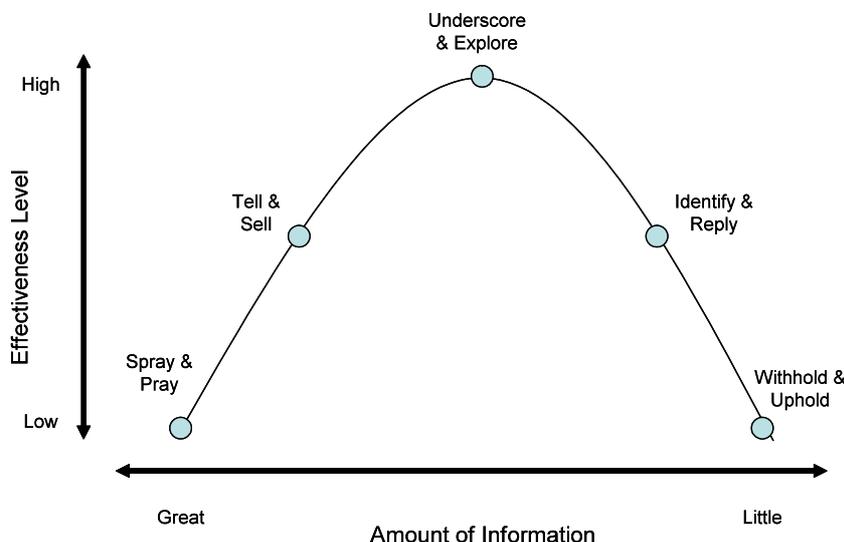
Message Strategy

Within the context of needing to gain commitment and understanding for new ideas and important changes we recommend an **'Underscore and Explore'** message strategy. Other strategies can create the illusion of keeping everyone informed but in practice leave people to pick and choose the messages they take from a wide array of information. Research shows that Underscore and Explore is most likely to be successful in an organisational context. This is highlighted below.

Spectrum of Message Strategies

Message Strategy	Description	Assumption
Spray & Pray	Showering people with all kinds of information hoping they pick out key messages	More information is better communication and decision making
Tell & Sell	Selective messages are communicated based on telling what the issues are and selling the approach to these	Employees are passive receivers and feedback is not necessary. The choice of issues is correct
Underscore & Explore	**Focus on a few key messages linked to strategy with time to engage, in a disciplined way, in discussion and feedback and listen for misunderstandings**	**Communication is not complete without knowing reaction to messages and ideas**
Identify & Reply	Identify and reply to key concerns raised by people Managers actively listen	People are best placed to know critical issues
Withhold & Uphold	Information is withheld until necessary. Secrecy and control are implicit values	Information is power. People are not sophisticated enough to grasp the big picture

In terms of effectiveness the following continuum suggests that the preferred message strategy is to **Underscore & Explore,** which means addressing fewer issues and then exploring people's interpretations. It has the added value of creating a dialogue around a few areas that have greatest potential to transform the organisation. In practice this might mean weaving a few simple messages into the fabric of the organisation.

Focus on Effectiveness

An effective communication strategy is measured against the answers to the following questions:

- Does the communication strategy advance organisational goals
- Is it focused on a few key themes or messages
- Are the channels of communication aligned with objectives and stakeholders' positions
- Have people the skill and will to communicate in accordance with the strategy
- Are the messages understood and acted on?

And Finally

Here are some simple rules for effective communication.

- Identify and understand the receiver
  - 2nd position i.e. 'walk in their shoes'
- Be clear on your objective
- Assess the climate and context
  - Test the FOE factor (Focus; Energy; Openness)
- Review the message (in your head and with others) before you deliver it
- Use words and terms that are familiar to the receiver
- If any sign that the message is not understood, clarify it
- If response seems critical, do not jump to a defensive reaction
  - First seek to understand and then be understood.

Communication Planning Worksheet

Name: Project Title:

Questions to Ask	Communication Plan
1 What do you want to communicate?	
2 What do want to happen/change as a result?	
3 Who's the target audience and what are their characteristics – think segments	
4 What is the context in which the communication will take place?	

Questions to Ask	Communication Plan
5 What might be barriers to interpretation and understanding?	
6 What methods/channels will you use to communicate?	
7 What supporting and coordinating action is needed?	
8 How do you plan to follow-up and get feedback on effectiveness?	

STELLAR

Questions to Ask	Communication Plan
9 What are the overall resource implications?	
10 Who will do what and when?	