

Planning Internal Company Communications

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Goal

We accept as a given that communication within an organization will consistently work toward the overall benefit of each employee and of the organization in general. We see the results of this in improvements in productivity, the quality of products/services, morale and ultimately, profitability. Our goal then is to build and maintain a communications system that allows information to flow freely throughout the organization. The premises initially established for a communication plan will tend to drive it towards certain specific results. But the plan should be flexible enough to allow the communications network that it creates to accept information from unexpected sources and integrate this information (and perhaps these sources) into the communications process.

This paper presents a model outline for a communications plan based on plans I have implemented in several organizations.

A communications plan should be comprised of three elements:

- the subject matter to be communicated
- the vehicles of communication employed
- an evaluative feedback loop to allow the plan to adapt to the needs of the organization

The outline for the plan begins with the basic types of information which we would like to communicate and the methods proposed for this communication. For this plan to be effective two key criteria come into play. There is a need for a discipline within the organization to consistently follow through with the commitments made toward communication in initially establishing the program and there is a need for a sincere interest on the part of every employee to make it work. Given the prerequisites described below, it is possible to build an organization which both functions better and provides every employee a greater sense of security and belonging.

Prerequisites to success

Commitment

The first prerequisite as mentioned above is an unerring commitment on the part of management to both establish and foster the plan. Communication takes a lot of work and unlike some systems in business, once in place a communication program will never maintain its own momentum. Management must exercise the discipline to keep the program alive and vital to all employees.

This participation by senior management is mandatory so that management can demonstrate a willingness to be an integral and responsive part of the organization. While that may at first sound odd, it is important to recognize that even a deeply involved management can appear separate and aloof to a workforce if that management has not effectively communicated its goals and its interest in sharing in the experiences of the employees. One of the most important benefits of an effectively executed plan is the development of a sense of community within an organization. Conversely, one of the most destructive factors to a sense of community is a perceived separation between management and the rest of the company.

There is a second element to commitment which is also important; that is the interest on the part of the employees to see the program work. As the following plan illustrates communication is a two way street. If the employees are not interested in communicating, it is not going to happen. It may (perhaps it may often) be necessary to first elicit some level of interest on the part of the company's employees in order to properly implement the plan.

Involvement

The company as an entity must recognize its place in the world. By this I mean the place that the company holds in the minds of employees, its industry and the community in which it operates. In the long run this last item is important because the company depends on community good will both directly for itself and indirectly for the benefit of the employees who live in the community. The company depends on its industry reputation to assist in retaining existing customers and obtaining new ones. Particularly in aviation, it also depends on its industry reputation to allow it to recruit qualified personnel.

For these reasons, the company must be active in the business and social communities in which it exists and bring this involvement into the program both as evidence of its commitment to the goals of the plan and as an important element in the subject matter with which the program deals.

Relationship

Throughout this paper, the terms “management” and “employees” are used to discuss two groups within the company. This usage follows an ingrained corporate dichotomy, but it is important to remember that the use here has more to do with the distinction between the people who develop and field the plan and are therefore responsible for its success or failure and the rest of the company.

In reality, there are often many levels of management and many levels of employees and the terms are more relational between two particular groups of employees upon whom the immediate discussion focuses. “Management” applies in various contexts to everyone from the CEO to the group leader within any specific group of employees. “Employees” refers to every individual in the company including the CEO.

One of the things that a communication plan should include is an awareness of these relationships and a focus on developing an appreciation of the community within a company that transcends traditional management and non-management roles. It does this by identifying each inter-group relationship and ensuring that that relationship is included in the communication flow.

Scope

Organizations which maintain multiple facilities or which utilize their personnel in remote locations must include provisions in the plan to ensure that information is uniformly communicated in each location. Two of the most difficult challenges a communications program can face are dealing with the us-versus-them attitudes that develop between divisions and ensuring that remotely located individuals are kept informed and made to feel a part of the organization.

Subject Matter

Crucial to a successful communication plan is identifying what should be communicated. It is also important that the program not be comprised of what has been called “content free communication”. Subject matter should be clearly identified and categorized in the program. The subjects to be included in the basic plan can be grouped into three categories:

- project or production information
- company information
- general information not specific to the company but of interest to personnel

Communication within these categories should be both bi-directional, traveling up and down through the organization’s hierarchy (with somewhat different types of information being transmitted in each direction) and lateral, within any given level of the organization. Importantly, communication between levels should be comprised of both step-by-step communications which flow through the company’s chain of command and of strata leaping communications that bring normally separated groups into contact. Several of the vehicles described in the next section provide just this kind of flow.

Project or production information should reflect the nature of the company’s business but in general it would be comprised of the following:

<i>Within Levels</i>	<i>From Management</i>	<i>From Employees</i>
performance goals and status	performance goals	project or production status
customer communications	customer requests and requirements	production problems and solutions
production problems and solutions		

Company information will be more generic focusing on the same things regardless of the nature of the business and consist of the following:

<i>Within Levels</i>	<i>From Management</i>	<i>From Employees</i>
morale and employee issues	company policies	morale and employee issues
quality, cost and schedule performance	quality, cost and schedule performance	operational performance
operational effectiveness		

Subjects may be selected based on many criteria. The following guidelines suggest several possibilities:

<i>Management</i>	<i>Employees</i>
information provided by other levels of the organization	information provided by other levels of the organization
information on each new project	update on aircraft in work
customer expectations of quality, schedule and communication	comments & feedback from customers
procedures out of the norm	impacts of changes
general state of the company & achievement of goals	concerns of the workforce

Vehicles of communication

For a communications plan to be successful it must be based on a variety of delivery methods. The larger the organization the more vehicles are needed. It is important to remember that a message delivered only once will be far less widely received than one delivered repeatedly. This applies as equally to a CEO's vision for the company as it does to an employee group's concern over a safety issue.

Newsletter – A company newsletter, whether distributed weekly, biweekly or monthly is one of the easiest ways to formalize a communication process. Properly used, these documents can keep everyone in the organization apprised of what is going on within the company, the industry and the community. As with any communication, the newsletter should be relevant to the people reading it. It should be informative, straightforward, well written and honest. As a propaganda tool, a newsletter sends a message of its own that runs counter to the principles of this program. It should also be completely and positively distributed. Each employee must receive his or her copy directly. Leaving a stack of newsletters on a lunch table or beside a time clock isn't sufficient and it sends the wrong message about the value of the newsletter. A bit of over-distribution is far better than any under-distribution

Staff/Crew meetings – Regularly scheduled and preferably weekly, staff and crew meetings should be conducted. There should be no employee in the organization not included in one of these meetings. The selection of the time for these meetings can have a significant impact on the way they are viewed by attendees and should therefore be made with care. For example, a properly conducted Vice President's weekly staff meeting on Fridays at 3:15 can send a message to the staff that the work week isn't over until the week's progress has been reviewed. In the case of a production crew, this same time selection can indicate that weekly production may end at 3:15 on Friday but that the company's business does not.

Each meeting should be conducted in accordance with an agenda that addresses all of the desired issues. The sample agenda in Appendix A¹ provides five categories (in an intentional hierarchical order of importance) of information. It focuses on information which the meeting holder wishes to present and information that the meeting holder wishes to obtain. An agenda format like this should be maintained and completed throughout the week so that issues that arise during the week can be addressed during the meeting. One that is constructed just prior to the meeting leaves too much to the chance of memory and distraction.

¹ The sample shown includes a spot for a quote. One of my favorite communications vehicles has always been the quote of the week. Over the years I have collected hundreds of notable business related quotes and used them as a way of provoking thought about general or specific conditions and events in the organization. Depending on the situation and the people involved, a joke or cartoon might be used instead. Regardless, it never hurts to ask people to look beyond the organization from time to time, either for inspiration or distraction.

All Hands – While not exemplary in its efforts at communication, the Navy has one tradition that is well worth emulating. The All Hands meeting gathers everyone on board, or in this case, in the company (or facility) together to listen to what the boss has to say. The importance of this vehicle lies more in the message it sends about the commitment of the company to communicate internally than in the subject matter covered in the meetings. By bringing everyone together at once, this forum provides each employee with a sense of importance in the organization.

The agenda for these sessions should be established to suit the current business and organizational environment. While it may be appropriate for a brief question and answer period at the end, the meeting will generally be more of a speech. These sessions should be strategy and success level talks focusing on major successes or challenges with pertinent upcoming changes also included.

Crew Lunch – There is no substitute for personal one on one communication. While in many organizations it isn't feasible for senior management to meet with each employee, it is usually possible for a high level executive or management level employee to hold a brown bag lunch with one crew or office every other week or so. Discussion at these meetings should be open to any subject and driven by the interests of the employees. Even if the conversation is about football or politics many of the same ends are served as if it is about the workplace.

Training Programs – Formal training provides an excellent opportunity to foster both horizontal communication across disciplines and vertical communication throughout the organization. Training settings, by being removed from the normal work functions and the communications flows associated with those functions offer people a chance to associate with many others in the organization with whom they would not normally come into contact. In so doing employees learn about others in the organization both as people and as performers of their specific roles.

Some types of training are more conducive to these opportunities than others. Employee development, leadership and safety training in particular lend themselves to this, but even technical training can provide opportunities.

In the case of training, communications activities can be built into the syllabus so that the training itself serves the dual purpose of developing personnel and conducting communications.

Rumor Mill – Rumors will always exist. The question is, “How do you take advantage of them?” The rumor process is at heart antithetical to good communications. Rumors are born of assumption and assumptions arise when people wish to know something but are deprived of adequate information to do so. In a strong sense, rumors are a way for people to take a small measure of control over their environment by imposing a supposed order to that which is unknown.

Sometimes a rumor can be dead right since rumors are also generated by people who have some “secret” knowledge that they wish to share. Sometimes a rumor can be right because the assumptions that led to it are astute enough to discern what events are taking place. But as we have all seen far too often, rumors are frequently wrong and can be extremely disruptive as a result.

The number, character and quality of rumors in an organization is largely a function of the culture of the organization. To the extent that an organization is comprised of largely satisfied employees, its rumors are likely to be fewer and less divisive. Ultimately, a communication plan aims to make sure that this is the case so the success of the program will automatically deal with rumors to some extent.

However, on a more proactive basis, the communications program should aim to identify rumors and validate or disprove them in a routine manner. Towards this end encouraging discussion of rumors in the other vehicles of communication can have the greatest benefit. Identified rumors should become part of the information flow. Once this flow reaches a source in the organization cognizant of the actual facts on which the rumor is based, that person or group can reply to the rumor through an appropriate program vehicle.

Process Improvement Teams – Whenever an organization establishes any special purpose group, whether for process improvement, information gathering or any other purpose, the group should be tasked with reporting their activities and insights to other communications venues. As with training situations, special purpose teams create different relationships between employees and provide different perspectives on conditions and events within the organization. These differences can provide opportunities to address problems or produce improvements in ways completely unrelated to the focus of the group, opportunities which might be overlooked if those in the group that uncovers them are the only ones exposed to them.

Implementation

While having a comprehensive program in place is the object of this paper, a communications program is not something that can be developed, tested and “switched on” as an ERP system might. The outline of the plan may be prepared initially, but it should begin by identifying what vehicles are already in place and how they are being used.

The next step in implementation is to restructure what already exists to satisfy the needs of the plan. Each existing communications vehicle should be identified and reviewed against the criteria and objectives of this outline. It can be helpful here to have a communications plan implementation team composed of people from throughout the organization perform this analysis. After completing the review, those vehicles for which improvements have been identified can be changed while still in use. This change process also presents an opportunity to integrate and test feedback mechanisms for these vehicles.

While the review and fine tuning of the existing communications vehicles is being done, other vehicles selected for implementation can be introduced one by one and integrated into the existing communications framework. Here again, the implementation team can design and put into place the mechanisms and processes to support each vehicle before turning it over to the groups or persons who will administer the vehicle on an ongoing basis.

Feedback

The final element of the communication plan should be the feedback mechanisms which provide those people monitoring the program indications on how successful the program is. Each vehicle used should have its own feedback loop to provide this information. These loops can be active (such as periodic surveys of the employees targeted by a given vehicle) or passive (as in reader response forms for newsletters, suggestion boxes etc.). Used in combination, active and passive feedback methods can provide the opportunity for anonymity that passive methods offer as well as the assurance that feedback is being sought that the active methods offer.

As with other elements of the plan, feedback mechanisms should be formalized so the discipline to continually review them is maintained.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a plan succeeds on a day to day basis so its implementation becomes an ongoing process. There isn't a right way to communicate, there are only successful and unsuccessful ways. Further, what is successful today may not be so tomorrow for reasons ranging from changes in the personnel of an organization to changes in the competitive environment to neglect of the plan to factors totally external to the organization and its employees.

Just as organizations have learned to survive and thrive by continually evaluating and improving the way they conduct their business, they must continually evaluate and improve the way that they communicate.

Appendix A

Staff Meeting Agenda

Date _____

Quote:

Subjects	Questions
Personnel	
Department	
Project	
Company	
Industry	