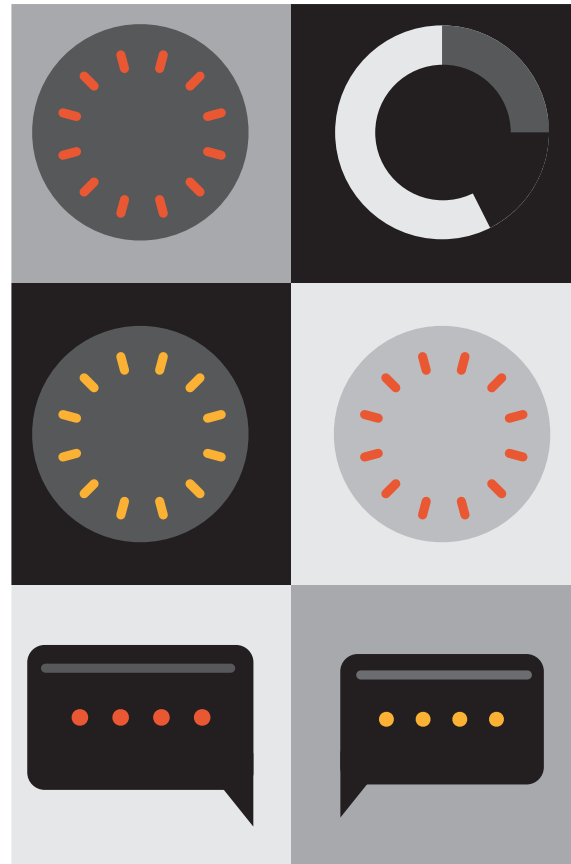**PwC's The Difference**
Creative Comms

Communicating to rebuild trust

Ten key principles of strategic communications that you need to get right to rebuild trust with your employees, customers and the community

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pwc

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The changing trust equation

Every day, we take many small leaps of faith.

We trust that our employer will pay us for our hard work, that our bank will protect that money, that our politicians will fairly represent us, that our personal information will be respected.

We often don't even consciously realise we're doing it, yet these leaps of faith are what keep a community functioning. Each time, we're effectively making or receiving a promise, and it is this patchwork of promises that underpins our society.

Until those promises are broken.

In tandem with the rise of collaborative consumption and a rising reliance on the opinions of 'people like me', Australia's oldest and most venerable institutions are suffering a sharp decline in public trust and influence.

The financial Royal Commission put the financial services industry under a microscope and found it wanting. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found heartbreak and coverups rife through organisations that were once at the centre of the community. Media has officially become the least trusted institution globally,[1] and public trust in Australian politicians and Governments is at its lowest in decades.[1]

In many cases, these breakdowns in trust stem from an initial deterioration of culture within organisations or sectors – creating a disconnect between brand promises and the lived experiences of employees and, eventually, customers. The earliest fractures in trust often start on the inside, with group behaviours that enable, encourage or entrench lapses in transparency, consistency or ethical decision making. Over time, this changes the standard of what is appropriate and questioned, enabling the micro behaviours of a few to become the accepted norm of many.

So, why does this matter? Put simply, it's not just bad for society – it's bad for business.

It's telling that trust comprises two thirds of the criteria of Fortune's '100 Best Companies to Work For'. The methodology, in partnership with the Great Place to Work Institute, is based on research which shows that "trust between managers and employees is the primary defining characteristic of the very best workplaces."

It's also worth noting that these companies beat "the average annualised returns of the S&P 500 by a factor of three".[2] Closer to home, 94% of Company Directors in Australia agreed or strongly agreed that trust was important to their organisation's sustainability.[3]

Now, more than ever before, the performance of an organisation is linked to its ability to build and maintain trust with stakeholders.

The integrity of the customer experience starts with the employee experience

While much of the commentary around trust has focused on customers, rebuilding trust with customers and the community must first start with employees. Employees are an organisation's most powerful source of advocacy, most accurate barometer of true change and the first audience that needs to buy in to any new promises of renewed purpose or values. If employees don't believe it, there is no chance customers or regulators will.

Employees play a pivotal role in building trust and credibility for a brand – they are often literally the front line for customer interactions and hugely influential in their own social networks. As many institutions look to repair their standing in the community, employees more than any other group need to be empowered to understand why that shift needs to happen and the role they can play in making that change tangible to others.

Despite this, employees are significantly overlooked and underinvested in when public scrutiny of a sector mounts. It often feels easier for executives to focus on public relations and external media to 'manage' the message or focus on repairing external brand perception. These are short-lived strategies and reactive solutions if they aren't combined with a long-term focus on culture and employee communications.

Whilst communicating within organisations in times of distrust can be especially hard, it's vital that employees are effectively and strategically engaged if organisations wish to regain influence and build sustainable trust with their people, stakeholders and customers.

Taking action – strategic communications during times of mistrust

Strategic communications holds an important position in shaping and reinforcing culture, and is comprised of two important elements:

1. Having something important to say that supports the organisation in achieving its strategy, and

2. Delivering the message in a way that meaningfully connects with an intended audience.

For communications to be successful, both elements are needed. An important message with poor delivery gets lost in white noise. Great delivery without substance is a gimmick.

When an organisation or sector needs to change course, it needs to start a new type of conversation with employees. PwC has developed ten building blocks of communication that help organisations in their broader strategic planning to build and strengthen trust from the inside out. These are based on recent research and our practical experience supporting organisations to rebuild trust in the corporate, Government, and not-for-profit spheres.

Ten key principles

1   Align leaders on the reason for change

2   Agree on a foundational narrative

3   Actively involve your audiences

4   Equip leaders to be the voice of change (formal and informal)

5   Create a defining moment

6   Be honest about where you've been and where you're going

7   Be consistent and compelling

8   Engage hearts and minds for cultural change

9   Measure what is meaningful

10   Bring a strategic mindset

1 Align leaders on the reason for change

"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."
– Albert Einstein, theoretical physicist

An effective communications intervention has support from the top, with the endorsement of an aligned group of leaders who acknowledge change is necessary and desirable. There is nothing more disconcerting to an employee than to receive mixed messages from leadership. A frontline worker who hears from one source "everything's fine, nothing to see here" yet hears murmurs of discontent from another leader, is likely to grow ever more distrustful of, and disconnected from, their employer.

Meaningful change can't be decreed by a single person, but must be owned and driven by a leadership cohort who take shared responsibility in understanding the problem and agreeing the approach to solve it.

The fastest way to drive this ownership and alignment is with a facilitated conversation, which brings the key people together to honestly acknowledge the issue that they want to solve, the principles they want to adhere to, what's at stake and what success looks like. The importance of this conversation happening face-to-face, with the entirety of the leadership team and before communications to broader groups commence, proves true time and time again.

Putting it into practice

– Bring as many insights, analytics and diverse perspectives into the leadership conversation to ensure decisions aren't made in isolation and group bias isn't reinforced

– Ensure everyone has a voice, not just the loudest or most senior. This often occurs unintentionally, so should be mitigated through specific facilitation and design techniques

– Choose an environment that will create a 'safe' and neutral ground for all participants to speak up and be heard. Agree the parameters and givens before the session starts to ensure the whole group is starting from a shared position

– Acknowledge the past and current politics but stay focused on progress and the future

– Ensure the leadership conversation is documented in a highly visible means by someone not deep into the subject matter – this also helps remove any bias in capturing that can undermine alignment and shared ownership of the outcome.
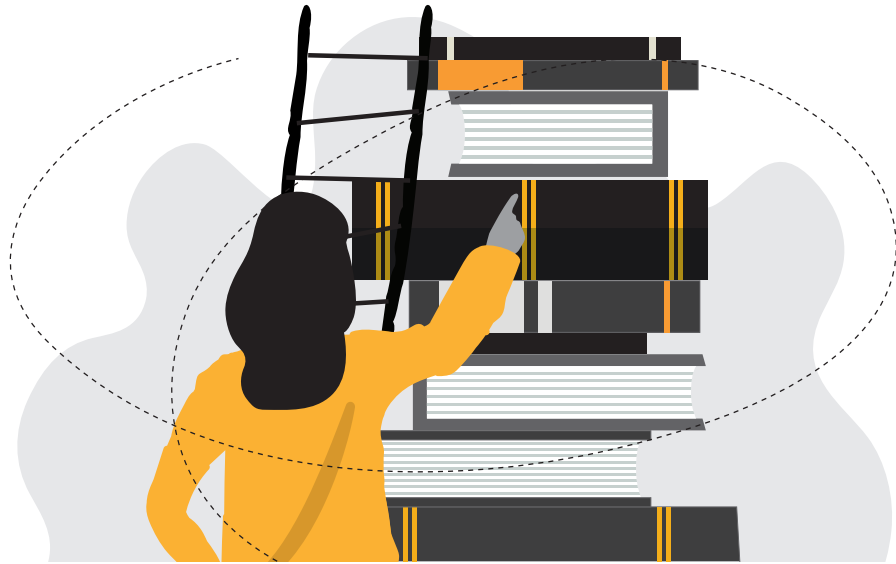
2 Agree on a foundational narrative

"When facts become so widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable. What begins to matter more is the ability to place these facts in context and to deliver them with emotional impact."

– Daniel Pink, author

Much has been written about the power of narrative, and it has an especially critical role to play in restoring trust and navigating complexity. Shaping a narrative is a practical first step in forming any communications strategy or renewed approach to messaging in these contexts.

In environments where there has been intense scrutiny of regulation, risk management and individual behaviours, there is often no shortage of documentation and communication. Often when fear and risk aversion increase, so do the complexity, volume and robotic tone of communications – specifically at a time when employees are seeking clarity, focus and reassurance in highly emotive situations. This is where a narrative, rather than catalogues of speaking points, communication plans and PowerPoint decks, provides a much more effective starting point to engage.

People think in narrative structures, which means stories mirror human thought.[4] They help define who we are, how we understand the world, build emotional connections and create a shared purpose.[4]

Narratives are best used to shape identity, knowledge and behaviours. In internal communications, narratives can hold networks of people together and provide a sense of shared identity, while simultaneously conveying the organisation's strategic objectives.[5]

Communicating with employees is more than merely presenting a message. When the goal is to drive both thought and action, communicators need to consider how their audience will process the content, as this determines the changes in an individual's attitudes, beliefs and intentions.[6]

Putting it into practice

A great narrative:

– is easy to understand and written in vivid, everyday language

– is no longer than two pages in length

– establishes the tone for current and future state

– provides a foundation from which other more tailored communications can be built

– tells the complete story that will resonate with new and old audiences, internally and externally

– balances the facts and figures (the rational component) with storytelling techniques to engage the audience (the emotional component)

– has a clear 'why' or 'case for change'.

3 Actively involve your audiences

"To make our communications more effective, we need to shift our thinking from "What information do I need to convey?" to "What questions do I want my audience to ask?""
– Chip Heath, author

Understanding your employees is vital for successful engagement. And yet many organisations rarely look at their internal audience in any meaningful way – the 2018 Gatehouse Report revealed only 14% of respondents had profiling tools that describe their audiences.[7]

Exploring audience insights and personas is a useful place to start. They can help correct biases and put the employee experience at the forefront of executive decision making.[8] Who are you telling this story to and why? What data and feedback do you have about your audience? What do they think, feel, do? Do you know the pain points and everyday experiences they have in your organisation?

Using these insights to then co-create with your audience leads to true engagement and ownership. This is what's known as the IKEA effect,[9] where people place a disproportionate value on things they've had a hand in creating.

Involving your people in co-creating the story or the campaign may take a little more time upfront, but it will save so much time and energy over the longer term. Even small contributions can create a shared sense of ownership and pride. And embedding an understanding of your employees into your organisation's employee engagement initiatives, can help employees feel more connected to your organisations' mission and values.[8] It might even have a restorative effect on them.[10]

Putting it into practice

– Interrogate the data you already have – what insights can you draw from employee surveys and internal social networks? There are often troves of data held between finance, HR, communications and IT. Sometimes simply connecting up these siloed data points can start to reveal interesting perspectives into employee behaviours and changes over time

– Ask for your audience's help to define and understand the problem – this can boost engagement, showing inclusiveness and authenticity. It also often reveals aspects of cultural strength and passion that surprise leaders and present additional and more positive avenues to tackle challenges

– Communicate early and often – waiting until you have all the answers only creates more apathy, distrust and space for misinformation. The reality of the modern environment is that you are also unlikely to ever have all the answers and that gaps in communications that you do leave will quickly be filled by others and the narratives they want to put forward

– Don't resort to traditional top down or bottom up communication strategies. The most impactful strategies anchor into multiple, complementary catalyst points of leaders reinforcing messages from the top down, middle management driving change from within teams and employees being directly engaged.

4 Equip leaders to be the voice of change (formal and informal)

"Sustaining an audience is hard. It demands a consistency of thought, of purpose, and of action over a long period of time."
– Bruce Springsteen, singer-songwriter

If employees are your most valuable source of advocacy, then leaders are your most powerful channel.

A common mistake we see organisations make is to overly rely on digital media. This is particularly acute during times of mistrust when people need leaders to look them in the eye. That includes leaders in formal management roles, and informal leaders who are trusted influencers at all levels of an organisation. Other channels are certainly part of the solution, but face-to-face can't be rivaled. In certain contexts it is the most powerful strategic lever an organisation has within strategic communications.

The problem comes when there is a capability gap in the organisation. Leaders at all levels can sometimes have been elevated into senior positions due to their technical ability and commercial acumen, and not due to their empathy or communication skills. This in turn impacts the effectiveness of communications throughout the organisation, as particular leadership styles create different levels of employee engagement.

Transformational leaders build trust and employee confidence. They motivate and inspire, address the individual needs of employees while also sharing a vision for the organisation.[11]

Transactional leaders rely on reward-punishment. They don't motivate, nor inspire, and find it harder to build trust.[11]

Laissez-faire leaders have a negative impact on trust, due to their minimal input, support and interaction with employees.[11]

Ill-equipped leaders can easily lead to a disengaged workforce – recent Gallup research shows that about 70% of the variance in engagement in workplace groups is attributable to a team's manager alone.[10]

Identifying and building a network of informal leaders, who may naturally be more equipped with EQ, can create a more powerful movement and authentic voice for change. Understanding your informal and formal leaders' strengths and shortcomings means you'll be able to target training and capability building within your communication strategy to improve their ability and impact over time.

Putting it into practice

– It is crucial your informal and formal leaders are provided with the support to share the narrative in their own style, in a way which resonates with their team. Empower them to understand the forces at play and the importance of their role in helping their teams navigate necessary changes over a sustained period of time

– Invest heavily to ensure senior executives can role model strong communications and leadership. It's easiest for leaders to create a positive and honest environment for communicating with teams when it is what they've personally experienced from their direct manager

– Encourage difficult conversations, even when they may question the actions of leadership, and ensure any negative behaviours demonstrated by senior leaders are quickly identified and addressed. Actions do speak louder than words, especially when they are the actions of someone in a leadership position

– Develop communications toolsets that play to the strengths of your organisation's leadership capability and build both short and long-term communications skills in those who will have the greatest influence over teams.

5 Create a defining moment

"Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients."
– Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group, author and philanthropist

Symbols are important. In an organisation struggling with a lack of trust between its leadership and employees, a circuit-breaker is often required to signal a re-set and a commitment to doing things differently. Negative stories of the past have a long lifespan; a defined moment in time can be helpful to draw a line in history when certain activities or behaviours were no longer acceptable.

In practice, what this means is the delivery of a unique and engaging experience which is rolled out across the whole workforce. It is strongly led by leaders at all levels, honestly acknowledges the current state and lays out future expectations for individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole.

While these need to feature authentic keynote messages from the most senior leaders, they must also include opportunities for every employee to engage in the discourse and make sense of the change and their role in it. In an intervention focused on rebuilding trust, interactive sessions which discuss ethical dilemmas through relevant, real-world scenarios can be an opportunity for everyone to explore what trust means in that environment. Tools which encourage open and honest conversations should be provided and engaged with and then embedded into standard procedures and processes.

Putting it into practice

While the exact nature of the defining moment will depend on the organisation, there are some key things to consider:

– How can you make this look and feel different to what has been delivered before? This could be through the launch of a specific visual identity, through the language used, and through the experience you shape for your people. For example, if your organisation traditionally uses formal CEO town halls for major announcements, then an event where the focus is on informal, personal group conversations could be a way to signal a break from the past and create a new dynamic. The attributes of any experience should reflect and reinforce the behaviours that will be critical in moving an organisation towards its desired state

– How will you resource and fund a fresh and engaging experience for your employees? Are you investing in them in a way that feels proportional to spend on influencing external audiences? According to a 2016 Poppulo survey of 700 global internal comms specialists, the average Internal Comms budget after salaries is only $185,000 for organisations with more than 500 employees. This increases to $250,000 for large organisations with more than 10,000 employees, amounting to a spend of just $25 per employee, per year[12]

– A powerful 'moment in time' must be followed through with a series of smaller symbolic shifts to have lasting impact. How will the organisation be different on the days and weeks following the intervention? Examples could include a new direct line to the CEO, a new expectation of whole leadership from every employee, or bringing the voice of the customer into daily team meetings or standups.

6 Be honest about where you've been and where you're going

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change."
– Brené Brown, author, public speaker

In times of mistrust, it is more important than ever to communicate with integrity.

People who role model honesty and authenticity should be recognised and celebrated across the organisation. In times of change and uncertainty, leaders must infuse their messages 'with trust, stability, compassion and hope for employees.'[10] Being clear and transparent will encourage others to do the same, and sustaining this tone is critical over periods of long-term incremental change where there will be steps forward and backward along the way that equally need to be acknowledged.

Communicating with integrity also can't be one-way. Part of it is about providing meaningful opportunity for two-way communications for your people to contribute or give feedback – creating dedicated channels and working it into the ongoing cadence of the organisation. But it can't stop there. Creating the opportunity to provide feedback is only meaningful if people can then see their ideas are being acted on. Look for ways to showcase that new ideas from within are being put into practice, and be transparent about the feedback that has been provided.

Putting it into practice

– Executives should find and cultivate an authentic voice and style when engaging with employees. Everyone doesn't have to be a charismatic leader, but they should be true to who they are and seek feedback on what aspects of their natural style resonate most with others

– In times of uncertainty or severe public scrutiny, sometimes the most powerful statement a leader can make is that all the answers aren't known, that an organisation hasn't gotten it right previously or that a situation is personally difficult. Being accountable, honest and transparent builds a credible and sustainable foundation for future communication.

– If past efforts to gain two-way input have resulted in low response rates or low value contributions, leaders should consider how they have been inviting others to contribute and whether they may need to be further equipped to participate in a meaningful way. For example, one large Government department we worked with went from a large volume of employee ideas with less than a 10% implementation rate to over 90% of employee ideas able to be implemented after a national innovation upskilling campaign.

7 Be consistent and compelling

"Consistency over time is trust."
– Satya Nadella, CEO, Microsoft

One of the key drivers of distrust in an organisation is inconsistency. This is very similar to how we engage with people in our personal lives. In the same way that it's difficult to trust a friend who tells you one thing one minute and a different thing the next, how can employees trust an organisation when different official messages from leaders don't add up or seem to shift in the wind?

Ask yourself, are you consistently communicating what your company stands for? Consider the Qantas example cited in our 2019 CEO Survey. Qantas has spent years cultivating a culture of genuine concern for customer safety, and this same core theme of care for others has been repeated in other company messaging, including CEO Alan Joyce's most recent support for same-sex marriage rights in Australia last year.[13]

It's not only crucial to be consistent in your language, but also your intent when it comes to purpose, KPIs, strategy, values, service principles and the code of conduct. Centrally aligned messages need to match up across different business units, and to make sense across the whole gamut of the employee experience. If you say your central purpose is to serve the customer, this needs to line up in how your people's roles are organised, what they spend the majority of their time discussing in meetings each week and how they are recognised and rewarded.

Putting it into practice

– External and internal messages must be clear and congruent. Employees need to see elements of their experience in messages to the market, from consumer brand campaigns to the annual report

– In resetting an organisation post a breakdown in trust, simplifying the aspects of strategic identity can be influential in helping employees feel a greater sense of focus and purpose. Map all the strategic 'pillars' of messaging across your organisation – from CVP, to EVP, to values, to brand promise, to service principles – and consider whether they are all needed and whether they are mutually reinforcing or simply just add more "noise"

– This is where joining the dots and holding the line on the narrative you have developed is essential. Show how everything links, keep going back to the same why, and ensure the visual and verbal cues you are giving throughout your communications make sense and are intentional

– It's important to recognise this isn't solely the role of the comms function, but part of everyone's jobs. Ensure communication is clearly articulated as a core expectation of all leaders in your organisation and part of ongoing learning and development programs.
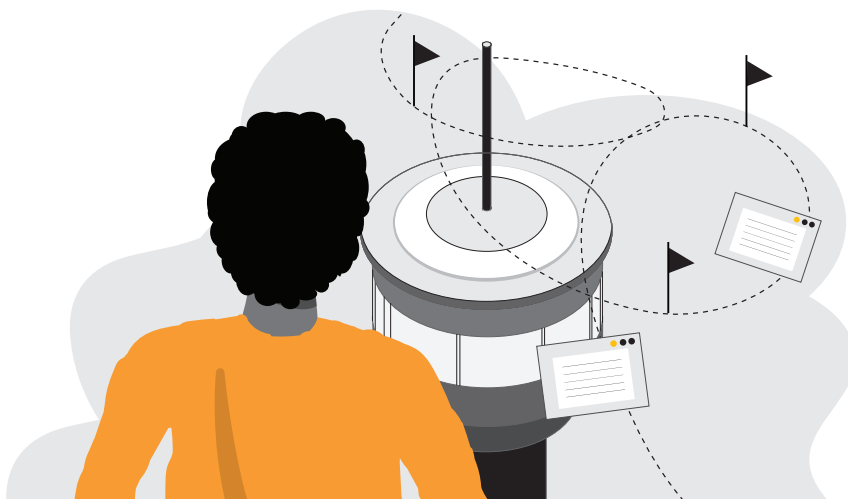
8 Engage hearts and minds for cultural change

"Creating a strong company culture isn't just good business.
It's the right thing to do, and it makes your company better for
all stakeholders – employees, management, and customers."
– Julia Hartz, CEO, Eventbrite

Shifting culture is complex, difficult and happens over years not months. While it requires much more than strong communications, strategic communications play a crucial part in engaging employees and must be finely tuned alongside any ongoing change or transformation programs.

Formal levers that should be considered in a change strategy include organisational structures, decisions, motivators and information systems, such as roles and responsibilities, policies, business processes, KPIs, remuneration, career progression frameworks and governance forums.[14] Your communications strategy should equally incorporate the formal levers that are being targeted. If a lever is determined to be critical to achieving the organisation's goals, it should be clear, tailored for the target audience and presented or relaunched to employees in a way that signals its importance and how they should be interacting with it in a different way. This will most likely lead to overt tactics traditionally associated with strong internal communications.

Informal levers are the networks, norms, commitments and mindsets that exist in your workplace – these include the social networks, habits, values, individual aspirations, shared language, beliefs, sources of pride and emotional connections that exist within your organisation.[14] Incorporating these into a communications strategy will likely relate to less overt tactics designed to influence and shift different behaviours into prominence over time. Our research has found that informal change levers are the most effective in driving sustainable change. And the more change levers used, the better. We found that organisations which used seven or more levers in their efforts had more than a 75% likelihood of effecting sustainable cultural change, compared to less than 50% in occasions where fewer than five levers were used.[14]

Putting it into practice

Interrogate your cultural plan and explore areas where strategic communications can impact specific change levers, either formal or informal. These may include:

– Joint internal and external communication audits done with a user experience lense can be a powerful tool to examine the role language is playing in driving certain behaviours and mindsets about customer service and compliance

– Campaigns and activations that deep dive into desired behaviours and mindset shifts and makes the future state of an organisation tangible for all employees and stakeholders to explore

– Case studies and vignettes that champion successful change and new ways of doing things and drive content and sharing onto social networking platforms

– Content platforms to consolidate information and drive social sharing and collaboration between employees and leaders to continue to improve and build content rather than relying on central teams to do so.

9 Measure what is meaningful

"The only man who behaved sensibly was my tailor; he took my measurement anew every time he saw me, while all the rest went on with their old measurements and expected them to fit me."

– George Bernard Shaw, playwright

Measurement is one of the biggest failings in strategic communications efforts. Research from the Gatehouse Gallagher[7] found that only 41% of Internal Communications functions in organisations had a channel framework that described the purpose, audience and measurement of internal communications channels. And further only 34% had a regular dashboard or reporting function that monitored communications activities and their impact.[7]

This lack of measurement can lead to a complete lack of strategic planning; Puppolo found 45% of organisational communications sent out were unplanned. This not only has major negative implications for the employees receiving a constant stream of low impact messages – it is a waste of money and utilisation of communications resources.

Measurement, when performed, often focuses on who is communicating with whom, the issues being communicated, how much information was exchanged, levels of trust and the quality of working relationships.[15] It generally doesn't extend to measuring how communications meet employees' expectations of content.[10] Judging communications purely by intentions, rather than results, is also problematic.

Whether an organisation is collecting data on click-through rates, readership, response rates and feedback – it's important to be clear what you're trying to measure and why. Just because it is measurable doesn't mean it is meaningful. Data based on volume will indicate popularity but should never be interpreted in isolation, away from analysis value the communication is actually adding to your strategic objectives.

Putting it into practice

– Don't just rely on the metrics you've always used. Take this opportunity to start with a blank piece of paper and consider what's possible and what will have meaning for your leaders

– Work backwards from what you're trying to achieve to understand the best data to gather. For example, if your primary goal is for employees to feel comfortable speaking up, then prioritise active responses (both positive and negative) to content

– Be selective. Choose the key data points that link to your main goals, and highlight these in reporting

– Don't just use measurement for reporting, embed it into the ongoing strategic planning cycle and feedback loops within an organisation to gauge how communications are landing and whether upcoming interventions need to be shifted or adjusted in response

– Be open and share your measurement efforts back with the organisation, not just the good stories but even where indicators are actually going down. Building trust relies on a greater level of transparency consistently being modelled.

10 Bring a strategic mindset

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

– Bill Gates, principal founder of Microsoft, author, philanthropist

In a world where trust is such a valuable currency, professional communicators have never had a more important role to play to help organisations achieve their strategic goals. Executives need to recruit qualified practitioners though and give them a seat at the planning table. Employee and stakeholder communication is rarely approached with a proactive, strategic mindset anymore; it has often been relegated to event management, newsletter production and intranet content development.

Organisations need practitioners who can think with an external mind to issues management and an internal mind to long-term employee engagement and experience delivery. This environment demands professionals who understand the complexity of regulatory environments and shifting business pressures, yet can help a CEO articulate a strategy in a way that resonates with the frontline.

65%
leaders and employees say culture is more important to performance than a company's strategy or operating model[14]

80%
leaders and employees say organisational culture needs to change[14]

85%
of employees globally are disengaged[10]

Putting it into practice

– Ensure 'strategic' communications in your organisation isn't simply a euphemism for 'external' communications. The reality is boundaries between internal and external communications are not what they used to be, and any capable communications professional should be equally weighing internal and external risks and opportunities when shaping a response to diminishing trust. Ensure you have a number of strong strategic thinkers on your team focused on long-term employee experience and engagement as it is often the poor cousin to external engagement

– Strategic communications is naturally becoming a melting pot of marketing, analytics, behavioural economics, user experience design, customer strategy, employee engagement and change management. Communications professionals should continue to learn and build new skills from within these juxtaposing fields, and make a point to increase collaboration between operating areas that have a large influence on shaping culture and client service

– Communications teams should not carry sole accountability for communicating to an entire organisation – this needs to be carried in practical terms by the line managers and leaders. Teams should, however, ensure all levels of leadership have high quality, clear and easy to use tools to build capability, communicate and drive change.

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