

Some Principles for Strategic Internal Communication

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Communication Structure and Design

- Design a corporate communications strategy that strikes a *healthy balance between complete centralization and total decentralization*.
- Create special mechanisms to encourage the *upward transmission of information and opinion, including bad news*.
- Create a *special advisory or “ombudsperson” role* for someone who is free to roam the organization and can “speak truth to power” without fear of retribution.
- Avoid excessive reliance on *formal communication channels* and messages; make effective use of *informal communication*—from the design of orientation programs to ongoing work processes.
- Establish *double communication linkages* between each hierarchical level of the organization and the ones immediately above and below it.
- Cultivate *liaisons between departments* that are traditionally distant from or in conflict with one another (e.g., marketing and production).
- Ensure that leaders or managers of units have *strong relations with superiors at least two levels above them*.
- Formulate projects that will require *the meaningful coordination of multiple units* of the organization. And, develop multiple communication networks throughout the organization.
- *Limit the size* of work teams, task forces, and working committees to 9 members; the same principle applies to the effective span of control or number supervised.
- To the extent possible, design or redesign workplaces so as to *foster group interaction*.
- View new communication and computer technologies in a *complementary role with respect to other means of communication*, rather than seeing technology as complete substitute for non-mediated forms of communication or as a panacea for organizational problems.
- Be attuned to the inevitable phases in the development of a group or organization, so that *no structure is seen as necessarily permanent* and such that flexibility can be maintained.

Goal-Setting, Leadership, Feedback, and Conflict Management

- Articulate *goals that are meaningful, realistic, and compelling*.
- *Set a good example* of the type of leadership you want to promote throughout the organization. For example, “Live” an open-door policy and make use of “management by walking around.”
- While promoting unifying themes or goals at the top, be sure to *involve employees at all levels of the organization in some way in the ongoing goal-setting process*.
- Offer *feedback* to peers, subordinates, and superiors that is timely, specific, and about behavior or circumstances that in fact can be altered.
- Make use of “*360 degree*” *performance appraisals* that are framed in constructive rather than controlling and punitive terms.
- Make effective use of the *multiple means of rewarding* and recognizing the accomplishments of employees. And, allow for employee input in the most effective reward systems.
- Recognize that all messages and most conflicts in organizations have an *implicit relational as well as an explicit content dimension*.

- *Avoid conflict avoidance*, encouraging others to go directly to a person or department with whom they have encountered difficulties (at least as the first strategy).
- *Discourage unhealthy coalition-building*, where the same people are aligned on every major issue.
- Be able and willing to *acknowledge errors* to colleagues and employees, as well as to external stakeholders.
- If a message is important, *utilize multiple media* for communicating it—including face-to-face interaction.
- Be on guard against the “*seduction of having more and more information*”: avoid amassing data that will not be put to practical use.

Employee Participation, Work Climate/Culture, Ongoing Relationships

- Through *comprehensive orientation and socialization programs*, give new employees “the big picture” of the work of the organization.
- Establish *peer mentoring* as an important component of employee socialization, training, and communication.
- To the degree that is appropriate to the type of tasks being performed, create or encourage *multiple means or employees to have input into decisions*—at the level of the work itself (i.e., in self-directed work teams) and at the level of problem-solving (e.g., through quality circles or task forces). And, take these seriously.
- Foster a *climate that is supportive*, in various ways, especially in the sense of appreciating employees for their own sake.
- *Avoid reinforcing conformity* while preaching creativity and entrepreneurship at the level of individual jobs and work teams.
- *Capitalize on emotional “epiphanies”* in meetings, work teams, planning sessions, etc. When people are most enthusiastic about an idea, there is energy for development and implementation.
- *Periodically survey employees* about important matters of concern to the organization as a whole and to them. Be sure to include opportunities for one-on-one and focus-group interviews, rather than relying solely on a questionnaire.
- Offer *clear, honest, and timely results* of any surveys, pilot programs, or interventions conducted in the organization.
- Allow for *employees’ suggestions for modifying corporate communications strategies* to emerge and to be considered in future planning.
- Make *meetings meaningful, focused, and dialogic*.
- Create a *vital advisory board*, representing all segments of the organization and with rotating membership. Respect this as a valuable working group.
- *Understand gender, ethnic, and cultural differences* in the organization not merely as things to be managed but also as elements to enrich the organization and make it more effective. Communicate a policy of “zero tolerance” with respect to discriminatory behavior and harassment.

Connections to External Corporate Communications: Public Relations, Marketing, and Advertising

- Recognize *the interdependence of internal and external* forms of organizational communication, especially today. Many messages presumably designed for external stakeholders have a huge impact on the employees, and vice versa.

- If corporate communications are not consolidated in a single unit, *be sure that the various departments under the umbrella of this larger function regularly communicate with one another* and are not working at cross-purposes.
- Pursue a *moderate amount of consistency* in internal and external corporate communications practices: neither rigidly adhering to symbols and slogans nor allowing for a complete fragmentation of goals. Develop mechanisms so that *employees are informed of important messages that are being communicated to outside stakeholders*.
- Envision *each employee as an ambassador* of the organization to outside stakeholders.
- Communicate clearly and in multiple ways *the level of the organization's commitment to employees*.
- Beware of becoming obsessed by *the latest corporate fad or fashion*; consider its specific and practical relevance to and meaning for your organization.
- Link the internal and external corporate communications in terms of *common values, identity and mission, while being careful to avoid empty slogans or "buzzwords"*
- When bad news is to be delivered—to any audience—*assume full responsibility for communicating it*.
- Strive to *personalize* both internal and external corporate communications activities, employing a variety of representatives of the organization.
- *Do not become so customer focused or market driven* that the organization's internal character is lost.
- Acknowledge that no amount of planning, forecasting, and "proactive" behavior can account for *all possible contingencies in the world that surrounds the organization*.
- Confront *the tensions inherent in corporate strategy today*—especially attempts to be simultaneously adaptive and in control.