

Building an internal communication strategy

Been asked to develop an internal communication strategy? Unsure where to start?

Used effectively, internal communication can be a powerful tool in helping an organisation manage its corporate reputation, drive organisational change and build employee commitment

To meet these challenges, you need a strategy that takes a planned, holistic approach to communication and incorporates all the elements of its full potential for supporting the business in the achievement of its aims.

So how do you develop a communication strategy?

1. Building the foundation

The starting point has to be the vision, values and business strategy. These should shape both the process and content of communication and provide a framework for employees to make sense of the organisation.

Key questions to ask

- What do we want the business to look like in the future?
- What will be different about it?
- What does that mean employees will think, believe, feel and do that they don't already?
- What will our customers, clients and suppliers/partners think, believe, feel and do that they don't already?
- How do we want employees to behave?

2. Planning objectives and messages

The second stage is to develop clear, realistic and measurable objectives, to provide focus and direction for your work.

In doing this, think through the desired impact of communication. It is to increase awareness, understanding, commitment, enthusiasm, agreement or comfort? What will people know, think, feel or do as a result of the communication? Segmenting your audience and thinking through the different needs and interests is helpful at this stage.

Key questions to ask

- What is people's current level of understanding on this topic?
- Do they have any 'baggage' about it that needs to be overcome?
- How does this play to their concerns or interests?
- What kind of language appeals to them?
- Who will they want to hear this from?

3. Channels

Communication channels can broadly be divided into three categories

- Indirect: Print/paper based (letters, memos, posters, newsletters, magazines, briefs, circulars) or technology based (video, intranet, SMS)
- Semi-interactive: Technology-based (e-mail, business TV, electronic bulletin boards, intranet) or face-to-face (briefings, cascades, presentations)
- Interactive: Technology based (video conference, telephone, webcast) or face-to-face (discussion meetings, conferences, workshops and seminars, training/coaching, appraisals, daily interactions)

There are few hard and fast rules governing how to match audiences, messages and channels. Much depends on the organisational context. But take care to distinguish between routine and non-routine messages, and make sure that that creativity and personalisation are not overlooked in the drive for speed and efficiency.

4. Feedback and measurement

Feedback and measurement channels can also be indirect (surveys, opinion polls), semi-interactive (telephone polling/interviews) or interactive (meetings, appraisals, focus groups).

There are many reasons why feedback processes fail - all of which can be overcome by rigorous planning at the outset.

Key questions to ask

- Is the purpose of collecting feedback clear to all concerned?
- Do you have clear criteria against which to assess the criteria?
- How will you assess whether the feedback is 'good' or 'bad'?
- Is the organisation's culture amenable to feedback – will anyone listen?
- How will you share the feedback and consequent actions with others?

5. Developing the relationships

Communication specialists devote a huge amount of time and energy to sorting out the infrastructure. But is only half of the picture. The relationships between leaders, managers, employees and project teams have much greater influence on how people feel and think about the organisation than the formal information they receive. Building effective communication through influencing the way people work and interact with each other is a big challenge but if targeted and framed in the right way, communication interventions will have significant impact.

Key questions to ask

- What does the organisation want working relationships to be like?
- What currently guides people's behaviour?
- What aspects of culture are amenable to influence
- What can you do to create awareness of the changes needed to drive corporate performance?