

The complexity and frequency of communication taking place in many organizations can have dire consequences for the target audience, namely employees. Key messages get drowned out by trivia, repetition bores the audience, and inconsistency undermines trust and credibility. Here, Bill Quirke introduces the “air traffic control” approach to managing and prioritising the many layers of organizational communication.

Developing a consistent planning approach

Cutting out message overload, repetition and inconsistency

By Bill Quirke

There’s an old saying that to “fail to plan is to plan to fail.” Corny as it may sound, this is a salutary reminder that as communicators we can’t rely on last minute inspiration if we really want to deliver results. On the other hand, John Lennon reminded us that “life is what happens when you’re busy making plans.”

Which brings me to my point: The secret to successful communication planning is getting the balance right. The communicator who focuses on reams of beautiful communication plans will fall victim to analysis paralysis, hypnotised by all the interdependencies. On the other hand, whoever plans on the proverbial cigarette packet will eventually lose all sense of strategic direction.

Key areas to focus on

In our experience, successful organizations plan communication at three levels (see Figure One):

- The bigger picture – ensuring that

communication is supporting the priorities for the business, and that key strategic initiatives are “on the radar.”

- The communication picture – clarity about the key messages that communicators must get across, what other communicators are planning and how can they work together better to reduce the risk of duplication and confusion.
- The local picture – specific projects and initiatives – helping ensure that project managers use the same approach to communication planning, so that local activity can be prioritised and co-ordinated.

Before we look at these three areas of focus in more detail, let’s revisit why planning is such an important part of the communicators’ toolkit.

Why planning is important

Planning is high on the agenda for effective communicators for a number of good reasons. Communication directors are tired of having to keep a wary eye out for unexpected, unpredicted and unwelcome communication from within their own organizations. It’s hard enough trying to cope with a volatile external environment without fearing you may fall victim to the “friendly fire” of

unplanned internal communication.

Global heads of communication want to ensure that they've got a co-ordinated picture of what's going on in individual countries and divisions and functions. For their part, individual countries don't want to have unexpected, time consuming, and inappropriate communication initiatives dropped on them out of the blue from the global center.

In matrix organizations, the number of communicators seems to increase geometrically. As soon as one baron within the business hires their own communicator, the air quickly becomes thick with newsletters, mousemats and road shows. Large change programs with large budgets enable gifted amateurs or outside consultants to engage in "cheque book communication," in which they can buy share of voice by out-spending their more constrained colleagues in the corporate communication departments.

Communication overload

Organizations are waking up to the fact that while internal communication is a good thing, you can have too much of it. They're shifting from an informal competition between various communicators to creating greater collaboration that allows the company to present a more coherent face to the business.

Employees continually complain of initiative overload, while functions at the center, change initiatives in the change program office, and the global chief executive's office all pursue what we call "flat pack communication." This is where the employee receives communication from all corners of the globe, without any coherent picture about how it's all supposed to fit together.

They're forced to bolt bits of communication together in the hope of building a coherent picture. No wonder the final result looks skewed.

Organizations are now waking up to the need for far greater coherence – so that each piece of communication reinforces rather than contradicts others, and that all stakeholders get a consistent picture. Getting that degree of coherence and consistency in complex organizations demands careful planning and collaboration between communicators.

Inconsistency undermines credibility

In external communication, inconsistent messages undermine brand and reputation. Internally, different and inconsistent communication can unnerve employees and reinforce their suspicions. In times of change, employees look for the signals to indicate what could be the real agendas of

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their leaders.

Employees become "Kremlin watchers" watching every nuance of communication from each of the leadership team to find out where the splits are, who's in and who's out, and what's really happening. Inconsistent messages from the top team can signal splits and fuel conspiracies that are often based on simple misunderstanding.

Most organizations now understand that the barrier to effective engagement of their employees isn't the amount of budget left to stage roadshows, or indeed the number of trees left from which to make newsletters. The real scarce resource is the amount of time and attention they can get from their people.

Unless the organization is clear on its priorities and focused in what it says, people will tune out. More and more organizations are finding that far from generating greater illumination, increasing communication actually creates inconsistency, confusion and clutter.

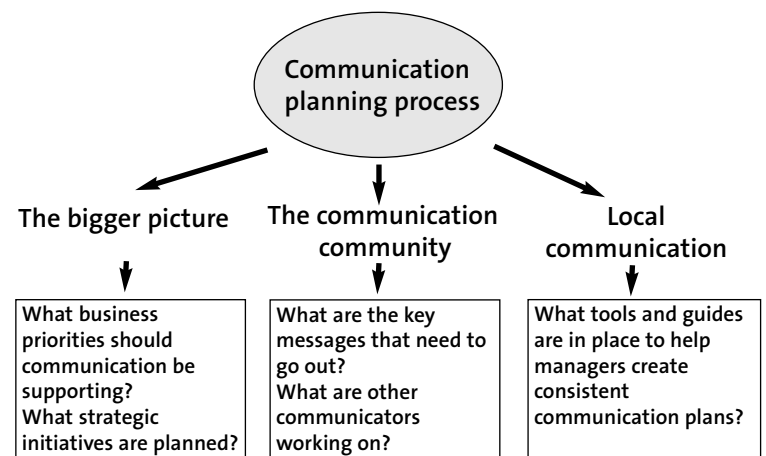
So what can practitioners do to improve the planning process? The following steps will help reduce message overload and inconsistency.

Step 1: The bigger picture

The first step entails looking at the bigger picture. At this level, organizations want to:

- reduce volume and eliminate duplication;
- make sure that what goes out is high quality and co-ordinated;
- allow space for people to make sense of the messages they receive;

Figure One: The three levels of communication planning



- make sure that key messages get the most airtime.

This means greater prioritising and reduction in the quantity of messages. Doing this involves a process of what we call “Air Traffic Control.”

This is a process for plotting what’s on the business agenda, identifying the relative priority of different initiatives, and mapping who is likely to be affected by them. Air Traffic Control then allocates time and space to planned communications according to how important they are to the business and their priority, rather than who can shout the loudest.

This introduces an element of co-ordination and control of internal communication, and reduces the number of unexpected or unannounced, high-impact initiatives.

Example: Planning at Vodafone

Vodafone is a good example of a company that has taken the idea of communication “Air Traffic Control” and applied it to the way its corporate global center communicates with its operating companies.

They use this approach to do more than simply co-ordinate and reduce the messages they send from the center. They’ve taken a more systematic approach to message management, mapping how communication works both from group to the operating companies, and within the operating companies themselves.

In doing this, the communication function is making a clearer connection between strategic priorities for the group, and how messages which support those priorities should be balanced with local content. To further strengthen this connection, Vodafone is developing a global process for internal communication planning.

Step 2: The communication community

At this level, the organization should:

- agree common approaches for communicators to use;
- agree priorities and key messages;
- co-ordinate communication from different parts of the business.

While communicators should respond to the specific needs of the part of the business in which they operate, they need to do so in a common and consistent way. To enable this, the organization should establish common approaches, principles and standards for communicators to follow, and create

opportunities for practitioners to get together and exchange best practices and ideas.

Example: Planning at Diageo

Diageo, for example, is keen to bring to communication planning the same disciplines that it applies to brand management. In both instances, this is led by a desire to manage a coherent picture across all its stakeholders.

To enable this, Diageo has developed a common planning process for all its communicators. Synopsis has worked with them to help establish a community of communicators all working to the same rules, with each understanding their corporate as well as their local responsibilities.

To share good practice, the company has developed a CD-ROM-based planning program, which all its communicators can use. The aim is to provide a tool to help communicators think through the key steps in communication planning. With a consistent process, it’s easier to compare plans and identify where there are opportunities for co-operation, as well as being alerted to any possible collisions.

Example: Planning at Amersham

Consistency in approach is the key reason that Amersham, the UK-based biosciences business, worked to establish a common communication planning process. They needed to co-ordinate communication internationally, across three main divisions – and across the UK, the US, Norway and Sweden.

Nicola Smith, VP change communication and her direct report developed a toolkit that provides communicators with templates to help them at each stage of planning.

This was supported by workshops run in the UK, Sweden and the US. In the workshops, a real-life case study was used to help participants practice each step of the planning process and build up a final communication plan. The workshop then looked at how to work with internal clients to help them plan communication.

Adopting a common and logical approach to communication planning, they felt, underlined their professionalism when working with internal clients, and meant they could focus on getting the content right, rather than worrying each time about following a different process.

Step 3: Local projects and initiatives

One stage on from ensuring that all communicators are working to the same patterns and approaches, is to try to standardise the way

that communication is planned to support projects and initiatives.

As many communicators will know, getting some project managers to even consider communication before the closing stages of their project, can often be difficult. For many project managers, communication is an activity they can leave to others. When this happens, it tends to be last minute, rushed and half-baked.

We've found that project managers are far more likely to consider planning communication for their project or initiative when they can see that there's a *clear and simple process*. For some clients, this has meant developing an online planning tool, which takes project managers through the key stages in a communication plan, and allows them to produce high quality plans that reflects the standards and process of the organization.

Example: Planning at Rolls-Royce

Employing some 35,000 people and operating in every region of the world, Rolls-Royce needs to ensure consistently high standards in its internal communication. To achieve this, the company has set out to create a global network of communicators playing by the same rules and using the same tools.

To raise standards, better equip the global network of communicators, and increase the company's ability to make change happen, Rolls Royce decided to introduce Web-based planning.

Working with them, Synopsis developed an online communication planning tool which was installed on Rolls-Royce's intranet. This allows communicators to think through step-by-step the key questions and actions they need to take, the communication channels they should use, and the measures they should apply.

This provides each practitioner with a clear communication plan that they can store on a database and share with colleagues. Equally importantly, it allows the global head of communication to build a database of high quality communication plans that give visibility of the different initiatives going on around the world. These can be shared to avoid one business unit reinventing a communication wheel that already exists in another.

In addition to enabling plans to be produced to a consistent format, the steps of the planning tool enable communicators to produce higher quality plans more quickly than in the past. And by having the tool up on the intranet, the benefits can quickly and easily be shared by all practitioners, wherever they're based.



PLANNING SHOULD AIM TO REDUCE:

- Unpredicted and unwelcome communication from random people within the organization.
- Time-consuming initiatives from the corporate center that haven't been planned or prepared for locally.
- An overload of messages with little strategic relevance, that drown out more important key messages.
- Communication that leaves employees with an inconsistent or incoherent picture of the organization's business priorities.
- Poor quality communication coming from managers without access to planning guidelines and tools.

Developing a common language

In today's fast changing business environment, communicators cannot afford to fly blind. They need planning processes and disciplines to help them avoid overloading the organization and to make sure that communication activities are focused on the right business priorities.

In summary, getting more out of communication in terms of coherence, clarity and credibility, requires the co-ordination of activity at three levels: Strategic messages focused on business priorities, messages from communicators working across the organization, and messages coming from managers working on local projects and initiatives.

Without some kind of common planning framework and process in place, it's difficult to manage the different agendas and communication priorities of individuals. Having a common planning process helps ensure a common language, greater consistency and easier comparability of plans.

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An online guide to strategic planning (SCM 7.6, October/November 2003)

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