Putting communication

Internal communicators frequently voice frustration at senior managers who seem committed, but who then only pay lip service to communication. In this article, Dominic Walters, Senior Consultant with leading internal communication specialists Synopsis, argues a way to make the connection between good intentions and effective actions. Rather than trying to push communication further up senior management's agenda, the internal communicator should be looking to link communication with what is already at the top of their list. In order to do this, internal communicators need to understand the business issues that the organisation faces, and link internal communication more demonstrably to the business strategy.

Introduction

The intellectual battle is won - most senior people recognise the need for good communication with their employees. What remains, however, is a lack of understanding of what communication really is and the role it has to play within organisations.

In many places, the bosses' view of internal communication is still largely based on assumptions which are no longer true, which means they want it to do a job which is no longer needed, and manage it in a way that is outdated. In a world of change, many organisations are using internal communication processes and attitudes designed for stable, hierarchical set ups which sought compliance. As communicators, we can often find that not only are we not playing with a full deck, we are playing with the wrong cards!

Selling the benefits

A key part of overcoming this challenge is to ensure we are listening and responding to our own best practice. A common problem is that communication professionals campaign for communication and push it like a product, without relating it to an organisation's business needs, or understanding how their pitch is being interpreted.

To do this, we need to understand exactly what the senior team thinks about internal communication. Most bosses accept that good communication is important. From there, paths diverge. Different members of the management team will have different views, and different values. Here are some of the attitudes to communication which we have encountered with senior managers.

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Communication is soft and separate

Most managers will readily agree that communication is a good thing and extremely important - but so is everything else and they have to get on with the real job of running a business. Communication is something to be done where there is time - or an activity to be delegated to the communications department.

Communication is seen as an event, not a process

When there are redundancies, or when there is a drive to cut costs, or when a new strategy is launched, senior managers feel there should be a communication programme to get the message across. Once that need has passed, however, and the programme is completed, it is business as usual, and communication wanes.

Telling the troops

For senior management, communication can often be translated simply as 'telling'. There tends to be an in-built assumption that the right to communicate rests with those at the top of the organisation who keep talking of 'what shall we tell the troops?'. Communication is, they believe, straightforward and one way.

on the business agenda

Communication equals information

There's a belief that communication is a question of mechanics, with a focus on delivering messages. This usually shows up as a desire to build the chief executive a bigger megaphone, on his assumption that if people aren't doing what he wants, it's because they cannot hear him.

The production line mentality

Decisions are taken at senior levels, then passed down the line to the internal communicators to be packaged and distributed as well and as appropriately as possible. There is little consideration of how communication issues should affect and shape decisions themselves, and the process of communication is a reactive and a limited one.

The hierarchical mentality

Though organisational structures may have flattened, the hierarchy mentality still seems alive and well in many places.

The ways in which it is reinforced can be subtle - for example, at the outset of a major change, the board typically goes away for a three-day off-site retreat. They are the best informed, the most strategically minded and take the long view. When the change is decided they come back to present the future to their employees. So, the Directors who are best informed get three days away to grapple with, and own the strategy. Employees who are least well informed, least involved in the background thinking, but crucial to the strategy's success get only a two-hour slide presentation, after which they are expected to be enthusiastically committed.

Looked at together, these paint a gloomy backdrop to the work of a professional communicator. How can we start to overcome these barriers? From our experience, communicators can benefit greatly from presenting themselves as problem solvers.

To be convincing, internal communicators will need to understand the business issues that the organisation faces, and to be expert in re-organising communication to help remove barriers to business success. So, if, for example, the big problem vexing executives is the retention of talent, communicators need to show how effective communication can help do this. There are some key steps in doing this:

Don't talk about communication

Directors are interested in their business problems, not communication problems. While they may agree that communication is important, and genuinely feel it ranks among their priorities, they are more likely to be interested in solving their own operational problems - namely, getting market share up or reducing the scrap level. They may not readily see the connection between communication and their problems, especially when they are measured not on the levels of their communication but on attaining key objectives.

Start at the end

Communication is a means to an end, and that end is helping managers improve business processes, and the performance of people in those processes. It is important to focus senior managers on a clear business outcome - increased co-operation between departments, identification of cost improvement, the removal of irritants and mistakes - all of which represent cost savings and quality improvements. Measuring the return on investment can then focus not on how efficient the distribution of communications has been, but can now look at its effectiveness in terms of helping obstacles to the business.

Link it to the business

An internal communication strategy should support the business strategy, and should help an organisation compete more effectively. A communication strategy will be different for different types of organisations, and needs to be based on an awareness of the gaps in the business that communication needs to bridge.

What is the problem that communication is a solution to?

Businesses have different markets, and different ways of serving the customer. They have different strategies, and the attitudes that hold them back will be different. They are structured differently, have different attitudes towards the balance of central and local control, have different ways of managing their corporate identities, and are at different ages and stages of evolution.

Although the conversation about the choice of communication tactics and tools to adopt will probably be quite similar, the business challenges faced will be completely different. By talking in terms only of communication processes without identifying the underlying business problem, communicators risk imposing inappropriate solutions. Here are three illustrations of current ➡

business problems and how they are linked with communication issues.

1. Customer Service

Providing a quality service or product to the customer and good communication are inextricably linked. Research among customers showed 60 per cent of those who reported reasons for leaving a particular supplier attributed it to encountering indifference among suppliers and staff. Employees who have been told to serve the customer, or serve someone who does, reasonably ask the questions how much and how well they should serve. Achieving the correct degree of customer orientation first requires agreement of who the customer is and what they are buying in terms of service and value. If different parts of the organisation have different views of who the customer is and what they are buying, there are bound to be conflicting signals and mixed messages. Anyone trying to keep all customers, whether internal or external, happy is likely to be unable to make any decision, since that is the safest thing to do.

Businesses espousing high levels of customer service have to ensure their people understand the whole business equation or risk seeing them give profits away to customers. Understanding how the business makes its money and how the business sets out to make a win-win situation with customers, is vital. People who like people and like serving them can also be squeamish about charging them for the service. If customer service staff do not understand, for example, the rationale for charges made to customers, their own values may dictate that they waive them, in the belief that these are another example of rapacious management wanting to squeeze more money out of customers. They see themselves faithfully protecting the customer from the management.

2. Product clutter

Product clutter describes the proliferation of different types of the same basic product. Instead of one packet of cereal in a kitchen, there may now be four or five, instead of one toothpaste for the family, there may be three or four different types for different teeth and different ages. While the creation of new products gives customers ever more choice and ever more tailored products, it confronts them with a bewildering series of decisions they have to make and an escalating amount of information they have to digest. It also has a similar impact on employees, who now have to master a greater number of procedures, change over lines to produce shorter runs of different documents, produce more brochures and commit different prices and discounts to memory. As the variables proliferate, the chance of confusion and poor communication escalates.

3. Information overload

Organisations and individuals alike are beset with complexity, bombarded with information, inundated with initiatives and unnerved by uncertainty. The growing volume of information competing for employees' attention is confusing rather than clarifying, and frustration with how communication is managed is on the increase.

Each time a new product is launched, or a new business unit is formed, the amount of communication needed to keep everyone informed increases at what seems a exponential rate. A common complaint is that operating units are on the receiving end of communication sent directly to them without being first co-ordinated with other functional departments. This lack of co-ordination produces mixed signals, lack of coherence and competition for attention. If communication is not co-ordinated and orchestrated, the individual has to edit the clutter down to manageable levels using his or her own priorities which are unlikely to match those of the business as a whole, and the material that gets through the editing process may not be what is most important to the business.

From the internal customer's viewpoint, communication seems to be overwhelming and uncoordinated. Each of the business units busily produces information which it feeds into the communication channels. Added to this, managers engage in 'vanity publishing' - producing updates on their latest achievements and promoting their own favourite initiatives. The net result is a bombardment of information at a local level, with communicators competing for attention and time, and creating an ever-increasing clutter of electronic information and videos and brochures. Meanwhile, the recipients experience more information than they can process and put everything in the bin.

Lessons learned

These are some of the problems a better management of communication can address. Outlined below are some of the lessons companies who have tried to tackle them have learned.

People make the difference

Competition has forced companies to compete more fiercely, and prompted consumers to ask for more for their money. In the search to add greater value, businesses have come to rely more on their employees' knowledge of industry issues, problems facing the customers, and their ability to convert this knowledge into appropriate solutions. They have come to recognise that competitive differentiation and added value come from the hearts and minds of employees.

Process improvement extends to communication

The drive to identify and improve key processes has forced organisations to re-examine their basic assumptions about the communication process. Since improvement in process is also based on a continual cycle of planning, doing, checking via feedback and them revising, this has driven organisations to keep a check on feedback from employees, and to respond, revise and improve in response to that feedback.

Internal customer focus

Similarly the shift in businesses from being production focused, to being market-led and focused on the customer, has led them to treat the employee as an internal customer. This has forced employees to begin talking to each other, to re-examine their assumptions and change how they deal with each other.

Benchmarking brings a shock

Measurement has become an issue, just as it had done with other processes. Companies are shifting from two-yearly employee surveys to more regular quarterly updates, with feedback to the board. Surveys are becoming no longer about whether or not there was a disconnect at grassroot level, but whether or not people understood what the organisation was trying to achieve, and how they contribute to it. Regular benchmarking in many organisations has showed progressive deterioration, especially in areas of perceptions of leadership and trust in the management team.

Seeking return on investment

In the continual examination of costs, communication has come under the microscope, and with it the question about what return it gives on the financial investment. This has forced communicators to demonstrate how they contribute to business results. It has also highlighted costs not only in financial terms but also in terms of the time for employees' consumption and assimilation of information.

Line manager responsibility

Decentralisation as organisations try to get closer to their market and become more responsive to it, has finally driven home the realisation that communication is an issue for line managers not the responsibility of a functional department. Cuts at the corporate centre mean that there are simply no communication specialists to whom the responsibility could be delegated.

Flexible working brings the danger of greater fragmentation

As companies look more closely at using flexible workforces, and mixing and matching full and part timers, the fragmentation threatens to get worse. People may be working short and irregular hours, and it may not be easy to pull them together in one place as a group. Yet they will increasingly come to represent their company to the customer, and it is vital they understand what is going on.

Fewer heads means networking knowledge

Companies want to compete by using the knowledge and expertise of their personnel. However, they do not want to duplicate experts in lots of locations. Now, they want to switch knowledge around the organisation wherever it is needed. Communicating knowledge and expertise has become a key strategic issue.

The stretch factor

Staff are now more stretched, as more work is done by fewer people. Stretching the working day, there is less time for chat, building relationships and the social interactions that used to diffuse communication around organisations.

Sharing the thinking, not the conclusions

Increasingly, businesses are running regular briefings about their business, in terms of progress against the strategy, and industry trends. Outside speakers give insights from customers and suppliers, and colleagues provide updates on progress in each other's departments.

Credibility and trust are seen as assets to be protected

Trust is hardest to establish when it is most needed. Credibility is a strategic resource. It takes a long time to build, and an extraordinarily short time to lose.

Communication is given time

Under the pressure of time, managers tend not to explain the rationale or the intention behind specific changes, and neglect to counsel their people who are themselves feeling under pressure. Middle managers report that they are told by their bosses to communicate, but are not allowed the time to do so properly. Increasingly businesses are allocating time for communication - into production schedules, into budget allocations and into timesheets.

Education not exhortation

Few senior managers have thought through the implications of changing communication internally. Signing up without that understanding has been self-destructive. The problem is not their lack of knowledge - it is that they are unaware of their lack of knowledge. Commitment without understanding is a dangerous recipe for unexpected surprises and recrimination. In order to show up all the different issues, agendas and values, a debate is necessary. Managers are more likely to enter the debate if it starts with a business problem, than if someone launches into the complaint about poor communications.

Use research as a mirror

One way of challenging assumptions is to conduct research internally, or to conduct it among customers and use their perspectives to contrast with those of management. The value of conducting internal research is that it brings people to an awareness without triggering their defences - it gives a chance for education not accusation.

Even where organisations suspect they already know what research will show, the process of conducting the research is invaluable, if only because it is one of the few upward communication vehicles available.

Conclusion

The world we now find ourselves in has very different rules for communication, imposes higher pressure to increase performance, and has changed the structure of organisations in which people meet and communicate. While the lessons from the past few years have helped, we find ourselves in a world where the 'school of hard knocks' is likely to get harder. The fundamental task of the communicator is to change the attitude of senior management to communicating with their people. In the drive for better communication, we should not be concentrating on building new roads - we should be looking at removing existing roadblocks.