

Putting communication on management's agenda

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ABSTRACT

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Getting communication right is vital to making change happen inside organisations – yet poor internal communication is routinely sabotaging efforts for change. Internal communicators are frustrated by senior managers who seem committed, but who then pay lip service to communication.

Rather than trying to push communication further up senior management's agenda, the internal communicator should be trying to link

communication with what is already at the top of their agenda. In order to be convincing, internal communicators will need to understand the business issues that the organisation faces, and link internal communication more demonstrably to the business strategy.



INTRODUCTION

The first step for creating a strategy for effective communication is to create awareness of communication as a strategic issue. Senior management commitment is vital to success, and unless the position of communication is raised on the senior management agenda it will be difficult to make it effective. Since 70 per cent of the information employees receive is via the grapevine, and since they have a healthy scepticism for what information they do receive through formal channels, senior managers are faced with a simple choice – to manage what elements of the communication mix they can, or be managed by the grapevine. Companies that rely on what little grip they have on communication to carry them through, are like cyclists riding 'no hands' – it is fine until the road gets bumpy.

This paper is the result of the author spending many hours discussing internal communication, facilitating off-site meetings on mission and strategy, conducting and giving feedback on internal attitude surveys, and it shares some of the hard

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lessons learnt in the process. It also attempts to explain some of the issues involved and offers a way ahead.

Any organisation today is likely to be facing at least one of the following pressures:

- a new managing director is appointed with the mandate to re-energise the business, and give strong leadership
- a new competitive strategy calls for a fundamental change in attitudes and behaviour
- a re-examination of the roles of the divisions and the corporate centre call for a restructuring of the organisation
- a shift in the environment, either regulatory or competitive, redefines what is needed from employees
- the adoption of a change initiative, such as Business Process Re-engineering or Total Quality Management (TQM), calls for employees' understanding of the initiative's aims and a change in attitudes and behaviours
- a shift in strategy involves restructuring, downsizing, cost improvement, divestiture of non-core businesses, and acquisition of new businesses.

Getting communication right is vital to making change happen inside organisations, yet poor internal communication is routinely sabotaging efforts for change. In a survey published by Ingersoll Engineers, poor communication was cited as the single substantial barrier to achieving necessary change.

'..... managers' apparent resistance to change stems from lack of understanding and the need for more or better communication rather than any underlying wish to oppose change in principles. Only when communication and understanding of the benefits of

change are achieved will commitment be given and behaviour change'.

It seems that now communication does not simply have a role in managing change, it is central to making change happen.

Most organisations recognise the need for good communication with their employees. What still remains is the lack of understanding of what communication is and the role it has to play within organisations. Managers want, and organisations need, more from communication than before. Employee research consistently shows the majority of employees do not know where their companies are going or what they are trying to achieve, but they are convinced that they themselves are already doing a good job. They get 70 per cent of their information on the grapevine, believe management has a hidden agenda, and feel that saying what they really think would be a move that would limit their career prospects. Meanwhile, managers think that they are good at communicating, are cynical about their leadership's ability, and are overloaded with information they can make little sense of, but are still not willing to share.

Internal communication is still largely based on assumptions which are no longer true, is designed to do a job which is no longer needed, and is managed in a way that is outdated. In a world of change, we are using internal communication processes and attitudes designed for stable, hierarchical organisations which sought compliance. Not only are we not playing with a full deck, we are playing with the wrong cards.

DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

It is important, as communicators, to ensure we are listening and responding to our own best practice. A common problem is when communication professionals campaign for communication and push it

like a product, without trying to relate it to an organisation's business needs, or understanding how their exhortations are being interpreted.

Organisations accept that good communication is important. From there, paths diverge. Different members of the management team have different views, and different values. Discussion between colleagues about improving communication is often based on different definitions. One may want simply to get clear messages to nominated individuals in an appropriate and coherent format via a reliable channel. The other may wish that senior management would be more open with staff on future plans, and may want to generate a more lively enthusiastic meeting of minds between managers and staff.

COMMON ATTITUDES

There are some common attitudes to communication the author has met.

Communication is soft and separate

Most managers will readily agree that communication is a good thing and extremely important. They know communication is important – it is just that everything else is more important, and they have to get on with a real job of running a business. It is something to be done where there is time and leisure, or something 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, and the pro-

gramme 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?'

Most employee communications can be likened to sending people their New Year's resolutions through the post and expecting them to keep them.

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 them to, it's because they cannot hear him. Typically, this involves shopping for new media of communication and imitating the technology employed by another organisation without the spirit that made it work.

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.

There is a manufacturing and production mentality underlying communication. There can be seen to be an assembly line of communication, in which discrete messages are produced by the specialists,

crafted and packaged and sent out, relegating the communication function, at worst, to the despatch department. Communication tends to be a product crafted to the satisfaction of the supplier, rather than necessarily of value to the internal customer. If a production mentality underlies communication, so too do the assumptions of a hierarchical approach, where importance depends on rank, and information becomes a badge of status, and a means of exercising power.

The hierarchical mentality

Though organisational structures may have flattened, the hierarchy mentality, in the author's view, is alive and well.

At the outset of 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. 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, and critical to the strategy's success get only a two-hour slide presentation, after which they are expected to be enthusiastically committed.

Megaphone management

Companies reviewing their communication spend too much time deciding what it is they want to say, what the core messages are that they want their employees to receive. While it is important to be clear as to what the messages are, this is only one side of the equation. Culture 'refracts' communication – you may say one thing but they hear another. Employees 'decode' all communication they receive, listening for the 'real' message. If business professionals do not know how

employees listen, they are not in control of their communication.

THE COMMUNICATION MISMATCH

For the kind of responsive, creative and innovative culture businesses need to foster, new communication channels are needed. The majority of existing communication channels are designed for effective downward communication, and are almost exactly wrong for the strong upward and horizontal communication that is needed. Increasingly, communication – especially informal communication – runs laterally between equals, while the formal channels run vertically, between people of different status.

Faced with the exhortation to communicate more with apparently terminally ungrateful employees, directors will wearily agree with the above picture. What they are likely to find more shocking is that the kind of organisation they now need to survive is being blocked by the communication structures, practices and style that have existed for years, and now trap them in a prison of the past.

The question is how are some of these issues to be addressed.

The communicator as problem solver

In order to be convincing, internal communicators will need to understand the business issues that the organisation faces, and to be expert in reorganising communication to help remove barriers to success. Rather than trying to get communication further up senior management's agenda, the internal communicator should be trying to link communication with what is already at the top of that agenda. Managers feel concerned that they should be improving communication, and communication is on every good manager's agenda – it is just that it tends to be item number ten on the agenda, and time never seems to allow them to get past

the first six urgent priorities.

LACK OF INTEREST IN 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.

For the business to succeed, communicators need to connect those who know what needs to be changed, to those who have the power to make change happen. Senior managers often have a dilemma – they need to find out how to get people to speak up who have been trained to keep their heads down. Communication is the way of making that connection – it is not simply about letting those below know what those above have decided.

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 cooperation 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. An employee communications strategy will be different for different types of organisations, and needs to be based on an awareness of the gaps in the business communication it is designed to bridge.

It is possible to imagine two different organisations – a car manufacturer and an insurance company. A team from each is gathered in their separate rooms to discuss communication. Each knows they could be doing better and both have a nagging feeling that they are not getting communication right.

The car manufacturer

The Chartered Institute of Marketing/Henley Centre concluded in 1993 that 'the more competitive environment will focus greater attention on the potential of existing customers', and this will mean promoting loyalty to keep hold of the lifetime value of a customer and increasing the contribution of an existing customer through cross selling or upgrading programmes. The cost of acquiring a new customer is calculated as being five times higher than the cost of retaining existing customers.

After years of focusing on the excellence of the car as product, dealers now observe that they make little profit on the sale of a car. Customers are wily enough to shop around, and rival dealers are happy to improve on the last offer. In the future, it looks as though profit will come from the servicing of the car, and from the sale of spare parts, as well as through the sale of related items like financing and insurance.

Whereas in the past, both the manufacturer's job and that of the dealer as part of the distribution chain, was to take the

cars the factory wanted to make, and to push them out to the customer, the scenario has now changed. Now the job is to keep hold of the customer over his or her lifetime, to build a relationship, and to provide responsive service. The sale of the car is just the opening of the relationship; it is what happens afterwards that will produce profit. This involves getting to know the customer, following up to find any sources of irritation and feeding that information back up the line to the manufacturer.

From being an outlet for cars, a dealership has to become an inlet for communication.

However, there is a problem. Communication like a river, flows one way, from the manufacturer to the dealer. Feeding information from the customer back into the system runs against the current. There is a customer complaints department to handle comment from customers, and to act as a baffle to deaden the voice of the customer internally. On the sales side there are well developed means of communication, regular meetings and flows of information. All of these have grown to serve the former purpose of the business – to move the product out of the distribution chain to the customer. In that conception of the business, the customer took the car, handed over a slice of the profit and, hopefully went away quietly. Service departments were the necessary price to keep the customer happy, and if there were any comebacks, there was always a complaints department for them to go to. Those attitudes have long since changed, but the communication practices based on them have not.

The majority of the manufacturer's communication is with the sales side of the dealership, and focus is on sales and moving units. It is the service department in the dealership which has the greatest contact with the customer after the initial sale. Service people have some

potential for feedback with the manufacturer on service issues, but there are few formal channels inside the organisation to connect service to marketing.

The insurance company

Long established, and having grown in a stable market, this business has a loyal workforce occupied with processing large amounts of paper, and complying carefully with procedures proven over years of practice. The business has three divisions, each operating in a separate part of the market, and all under different names. Each division operates independently, having been split from the corporate body some years before. A corporate identity review resulted in each division adopting the group name as a prefix to their own, although they operate autonomously.

Recent changes in competition are causing ripples through the business. Car insurance in particular has changed as customers have been able to go directly to competitors and get lower premiums and better, faster service. The new strategy calls for greater responsiveness to customers, while increasing the efficiency of operations internally, providing faster service to internal customers and colleagues, and reducing costs in the process.

Staff already believe they provide a good service, and that they have been doing a good job for years. Dedication to their traditional customer is a value they hold dear. Their business strategy of focusing on a more selective customer base, with lower processing costs and lower claims seems to them to be discrimination, dropping the loyal customers of the past to chase more profitable customers in the future. The emphasis on customer service, within cost, seems to be attacking the traditional values of the past.

The strategy of offering customers a one-stop service where they can buy all types of insurance at once, calls for greater

cooperation between the businesses and a reorganisation of processes to reflect the customer's needs rather than the business's operational priorities. However, employees tend to identify with their own individual businesses, and this loyalty is reinforcing a parochial focus, and hindering cooperation.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM THAT COMMUNICATION IS A SOLUTION TO?

These two 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 they face will be completely different. By talking in terms only of communication processes without identifying the underlying business problem, communicators risk imposing inappropriate solutions.

There are no lack of business problems that communication can help address, as the following hypothetical situation shows.

Fraternal Finance has decided that in its market place, it will differentiate itself through closeness to the customer. It will be distinctive in its ability to understand intimately its customers' needs as they move through different stages of their lives, from childhood, to 'young married' to 'empty nester', providing them with

appropriate financial solutions tailored to their different needs at each stage. This is an inspired strategy, they believe, and they also believe that their chosen segments of customers will pay for the extra value offered. The senior management team is keen to educate staff about the strategy and to equip them to deliver on it. While the marketing department starts to draft the communication programme, no one has yet understood, that the prevailing internal communication strategy is fatally at odds with the new business strategy.

In a tighter regulatory environment, with more sophisticated customers, increasingly shopping around on rates, the new strategy will require staff to understand customers more deeply, and also to understand a wider range of products. While the branch network is used as a distribution channel, more responsibility and tasks are being devolved to the branch, increasing workloads. There is a general feeling that with the decentralisation of work to the branches, all the extra tasks have not been calculated into the workload.

The pressure of time and workload is driving staff to focus on only the information that is of immediate use to getting the task done, paying attention to those things which are driven by deadlines. While there may be a general interest and desire to know more, staff feel there is simply no time to assimilate information for anything other than the immediate job. Briefing sheets containing procedural changes and regulation changes – such as alerts to lost pass books and stolen cheques – are central to the ability to do the basic job properly and are circulated regularly, and in great number to the branches. Each person is supposed to read, assimilate, tick and then file the briefing sheets. Instead, to save time, the sheets are circulated and ticked off with-

out anyone actually reading or understanding their contents. So, even in those areas which are seen to be most important, there is a growing danger that staff are not up to date with crucial operational procedures.

Time pressure on staff means they have to be more selective in the information they use, so operational procedures are read first, and because commission needs to be earned, sales messages get through next. Information about customers, though central to the strategy comes last and is first to be discarded if time is scarce. The greater the volume of information, the less time there is for staff to absorb and assimilate it. The more task focused staff become, the more they will select operational information over any other. At branch level there is a great awareness that communication is about creating a wider understanding of why things are done, not just what has to be done. To them it seems that head office only sees communication as the distribution of information needed to follow procedures, and sales information to support the push of particular products. The branches see some very mixed signals between the espoused strategy for customer focus, and the profit-and-loss mentality that charges for a bounced cheque, insists on an additional revaluation when re-mortgaging, and exacts an arrangement fee for switching to a fixed-rate mortgage. The net result is that the business's espoused competitive positioning to closeness to the customer is undermined.

This is being caused by the fact that there are, in effect, three internal communication strategies which are simultaneously at work, each designed to support a different competitive strategy, but which work in conflict with each other:

- the efficient distribution of information to allow compliance with opera-

tional procedures, and to ensure the best operational efficiency

- the distribution of sales information to maximise the sales of distinctive and well-designed products
- the education about customers, the different stages of their life cycle and relevant needs, and the creation of involvement, context and commitment to enable staff to provide service to customer and colleagues.

Each is the legacy of a different stage of development, and a different strategy for serving the customer in a way that provides competitive differentiation. Each is followed up by a different department, each of whom has access to the branches, each of which has a need for its own communication strategy.

Without an understanding among those departments of how the communication strategy has to be tuned to the business strategy, and without effective orchestration of their efforts, staff are driven to be selective themselves using whatever yardsticks and criteria they have to hand. Worse, when complaints about poor internal communication mount up, and research is called for, the typical communication audit will not uncover the true problem of the mismatch between business strategy and communication strategy.

Senior management will see their priority as establishing their chosen competitive differentiation, and they will welcome anyone who can help them remove internal barriers to doing so. If the problem is presented as one of how to improve poor internal communication, it will be seen as a lower priority – making the business strategy work is something far more immediate and urgent. Whoever is managing the communication function needs to understand the business strategy, the obstacles to achieving it, and the

sources of frustration at the top of senior management's agenda.

FIND THE PAIN

A sales organisation is facing an increasingly competitive market. Its core product is becoming a commodity and to compete it has to offer additional services and advice. Sales people know about the products, but they do not know about the services. They are supposed to be selling the capability of the whole company, but they do not know what those capabilities are, or where the expertise is located inside the organisation. Instead, they call up their friends at head office and are passed from person to person until they stumble upon information. Unfortunately, people at head office are not familiar with what their colleagues are doing in other departments, so they cannot be too helpful. All of this is lost sales time, confusion and diversionary activity due to a lack of communication. The issue that will provoke most pain for senior management is not poor communication but lost sales time, delayed account planning and decreased competitiveness.

QUALITY AND COMMUNICATION

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.

While customer service departments and sales departments may have access to regular customer feedback, it is not unusual to find that other departments do not get the feedback. Peter Chadwick, a continuous improvement consultancy, studied 300 companies in Britain, France and Germany. 80 per cent of companies reviewed monitored customer satisfaction, but only 20 per cent made the information available below middle management.

Research among employees has highlighted an interesting twist to relations between different departments – a syndrome called 'the unknown incompetent'. People in one area may not actually know what another area does, but in the absence of any knowledge about it, they nevertheless feel it is fairly inept at whatever it does. This is a sobering discovery when organisations are relying on departments to cooperate and communicate laterally as part of key processes.

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.

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.

To create a culture focused on the customer and on quality requires strong and clear leadership. Senior management need to be committed, because lack of commitment is transparent and readily detected. They need to demonstrate that commitment goes beyond agreeing and repeating messages, or going out on the road to meet people. For the board director and the chief executive a demonstration of commitment means that how they behave, and what they signal, are now crucial parts of the communication strategy.

The companies that have taken major steps forward in developing a customer and quality focused culture such as Xerox and IBM, are often those that have had a rude shock and their position in the market place seriously threatened. Their commitment came out of having a few other options. The late Dr W. Edwards

Deming, authoritative leader of thinking on customers and quality, was asked by managers how they could convince their own bosses to take focusing on the customer more seriously, and replied 'pray for it to get worse'.

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 geometric rate. A common complaint is that operating units are on the receiving end of communication sent directly to them without being first coordinated with other functional departments. This lack of coordination produced mixed signals, lack of coherence and competition for attention. If communication is not coordinated 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 com-

municators competing for attention and time, and creating 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

If these are some of the problems a better management of communication can address, what are some of the lessons companies who have improved their internal communication have learned?

People make the difference.

Competition has forced companies to compete more fiercely, and prompted consumers to ask for more for their money. More demanding customers led to the commoditisation of core products, as everything from aircraft engines to motorcars became more and more similar, and suppliers sought to provide added value. This added value has come, in part, from employees' knowledge of industry issues, problems facing the customers, and their ability to convert this knowledge into appropriate solutions. Competitive differentiation and added value therefore came from the hearts and minds of employees.

Staff retention became as much an issue as customer retention, as companies realised it was not simply the recruitment costs of replacing employees that hurt the business, but rather the loss of the knowledge of customers' needs and the ability to respond to them which resided in the brains of the people working for them.

Process improvement extends to communication

The drive to identify and improve key processes has forced organisations to re-examine their basic assumption about the communication process. Since improvement in process is also based on a continual cycle of planning, doing, checking

via feedback and then 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 became an issue, just as it had done with other processes. Companies shifted from two-yearly employee surveys to more regular quarterly updates, with feedback to the board. Surveys were 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 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 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, finally drove home the realisation that communication was an issue for line managers not the responsibility of a functional department. Cuts at the corporate centre meant that there were simply no communication specialists to whom the responsibility could be abrogated.

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. By 2003, it is estimated that 50 per cent of the workforce will be part time, and 70 per cent of those will be women. Part timers may see the job as only a part of their lives, which has to fit in with other commitments. They will 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. Typically, employees receive 70 per cent of their information on the grapevine, and

by corridor communication and informal networking. Reductions in the number of personnel have damaged these apparently peripheral activities, and have driven social interaction down, eroding the mortar that helped cement different parts of the organisation together. One organisation found smokers were best informed, as in a no-smoking office, those standing outside smoking were members of all different grades and departments, and had the time and opportunity to swap gossip.

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 is seen as an asset to be protected.

Trust is hardest to establish when it is most needed. The competition helped to reduce trust and management's credibility. Credibility is a strategic resource. It takes a long time to build, and an extraordinarily short time to lose. Ironically, thanks to the growing awareness of the impact a crisis can have on a business, and the examples of Tylenol, Perrier and Heinz, senior management are becoming more truthful with their personnel about the real state of the business.

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 writing in time

for communication – into production schedules, into budget allocations and into timesheets.

Internal communicators may have won the battle that informed employees are more productive employees, but the battle lines have been re-drawn. Managers want, and organisations need, more from communication than before. The increasing level of frustration among senior managers for the need for change in attitudes and behaviour is only slowly being matched by an increase in their understanding of communication or their role in it.

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.

It is important to know what the concerns of personnel are, and how they get

their communication. Without this information communication is useless. Internal research allows benchmarks to be set to measure performance and return on investment, and for communication to be targeted more effectively.

At the moment it is possible to predict correctly 60 per cent of what research in your organisation might show. 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

Competition has changed the rules for communication, and shifted the context in which communication happens. It has provided the pressure to force organisations to look at how they have communicated and to try and improve it. 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 five years have helped, we find ourselves in the world where the 'school of hard knocks' is likely to get harder. The fundamental task of the employee as 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 road-blocks.

REFERENCE.

- (1) Peter Chadwick Consultancy (1994), 'Satisfying the Customer: Fact or Fiction', February Report, London.