



STRATEGIC THINKERS

In this new occasional feature, *SCM* talks to thought leaders in the field of internal communication and takes an in-depth look at the theory that fuels strategic communication best practice. In this issue, we talk to Bill Quirke, a leading authority on communication and the management of change. Quirke is the author of *Communicating Corporate Change* and more recently, *Making the Connections*. He's also Managing Director of Synopsis Communication Consulting and a member of the *SCM* editorial board.

Bill Quirke has charted the rise of the internal communication industry over recent years, and in this article, *SCM* talks to him to find out his observations and advice on how communicators can prove their strategic value to the organization.

IDENTIFYING THE REAL VALUE OF COMMUNICATION

A conversation with Bill Quirke, author of *Making the Connections*

In his latest book, *Making the Connections – Using Internal Communication to Turn Strategy into Action*, Bill Quirke suggests that organizations will not be able to differentiate themselves from the competition unless they transform their internal communication. His main argument is that, while companies may have got slicker at communication they have not necessarily got better. Organizations are producing huge volumes of “toxic communication” – memos, newsletters, voice mails, e-mails and intranets – that consume time and confuse employees. Quirke suggests that life is moving too fast to rely on this inadequate way of communicating.

Organizations must make the connections between their business strategy and communication strategy, between the management speak that's sent out to employees and what they are supposed to understand from it, and between corporate rhetoric and any specific action that should result. In his book, Quirke talks about making those connections, and here we talk to him about the issues raised.

SCM: *Making the Connections* examines how businesses can use internal communication to achieve their objectives and what internal communication needs to deliver to achieve best results. What prompted you to write about this?
Quirke: In recent years, communication has established itself as a critical component of any corporate change initiative. To some degree, we can now claim that the battle about communication's importance is won, but there's a new battle ahead about *how* it should be done.

Communication is becoming seen as less of a craft industry and more of a profession. It's not just communication that's becoming strategic, functions such as HR have also been called to account to act as a strategic player. So, if communicators are to be seen as more professional, communication departments must demonstrate how they add value to the business.

But there has been a downside to this new professionalism. For years internal communicators have been trying to promote understanding among senior managers of the importance of communication. However, as soon as managers make the connection and realize its true importance, they seem immediately to want to give the job of communicating to another department such as change management or marketing. Champions

KEYPOINTS

- Defining the value of communication should be at the front of every communicator's mind.
- While companies may have got slicker at communication they have not necessarily got better. Organizations are producing huge volumes of "toxic communication" – memos, newsletters, voice mails, e-mails and intranets – that consume time and confuse employees.
- Rather than trying to push communication up the management agenda, it's more valuable to start with the issues already at the top of the agenda.
- The most common problems tend to be the basic ones, like using management speak, and getting the balance between high tech and high touch communication wrong.
- Communicators need to show their leaders clearly the connection between business strategy and the communication plan, because the majority of leaders are unlikely to make it for themselves.

of the communication cause can often find that they're talking themselves out of business.

Communicators have had to reassess their position in order to keep hold of their business. They have had to look at the bigger communication picture. However, this means different things to different people. In some cases communicators have confused volume with value, and focused on extending their armory of communication channels, rather than helping achieve the business strategy. This is "toxic" media: memos, newsletters, voice mails, e-mails and intranets – all of which consume employees' time and have the potential to confuse. (See sidebars, for examples of toxic communication). Thinking about this type of messaging overload has raised the questions:

- How can communication add value?
- How do you make a stronger link between business payoff and communication investment?
- How do you link together different components of communication so that it all adds value as a whole rather than individual parts working against each other?

SCM: Why have these problems arisen?

Quirke: It's to do with what we call the aspiration gap. Communicators are inevitably good at getting messages out, but they should really be getting involved in the actual planning earlier. That way they can anticipate and add value by helping the business achieve its strategic ends rather than focusing at the last minute on the communication means. Unfortunately, senior management rarely looks to internal communication as a strategic partner because they typically see the department as being largely executional. If internal communicators do not talk in business terms, they reinforce that perception. I called the book *Making the Connections* for two reasons – firstly,

communicators need to show their leaders clearly the connection between business strategy and the communication plan, because the majority of leaders are unlikely to make it for themselves. Secondly, if communicators do not clearly make that connection, somebody else is going to start examining what value they are bringing to the business, probably using very different criteria.

SCM: How would you go about defining value in a typical organization?

Quirke: There are many ways of looking at value. One way is to look at what the business is trying to do – communication is a means to an end, so it's better to start at the end – what's the business trying to achieve and what obstacles are causing it pain? Rather than trying to push communication up the management agenda, it's more valuable to start with what's already at the top of the agenda. Depending on the strategy, points of pain include:

- low retention of customers;
- high cost of customer acquisition;
- high cost base;
- need for greater internal collaboration;
- need to stimulate greater cross selling and customer service;
- falling market share;
- increased cost of administration;
- high employee turnover.

Toxic communication: E-mail

Let's take e-mail as an example of toxic communication. As a medium it's often misused. It's a messaging tool that lets the sender reach large groups of people in a way that's time efficient for the broadcaster, but can actually create mayhem for the recipient. Messages are sent half baked and the recipient is required to fully bake them. From the receiver's perspective, e-mail requires time and attention. Communicators should always take this into account before sending e-mail messages.

One organization, for example, was concerned with how it could drive its share price up. Communicators started by making a clear connection between the share price and communication objectives. They identified a number of ways they could help: they improved existing knowledge management efforts and the way employees captured and shared information. This helped raise understanding of products and services and increased revenue growth.

Similarly, a pharmaceuticals company used internal communication to increase cooperation between R&D and marketing departments to speed up product development, and reduce the costs of getting new drugs to market.

Internal communication can help solve business problems, but it has to find problems which concern the internal client. Value is in the eye of the beholder. If the internal client does not feel something is a problem, nothing that's done for him will look like a solution.

For example, internal communication can only valuably increase staff retention if staff turnover is a problem for the business. High employee turnover and the need for higher retention may be a key concern for IT organizations and management consultancies because of the shortage of skills, but be a matter of some indifference to a retailer who accepts the seasonal migration of young shop assistants.

If the business has strategic aspirations, there will be barriers to achieving them. If an organization is undergoing change, employees will be lagging behind and communication practices will have become outdated. Some element of communication will be involved.

SCM: How can communicators demonstrate their value if they do not have access to senior management and are unable to actively work on business strategy?

Sometimes organizations don't really know what their strategy is or communication departments are perceived to be little more than publishing

outfits. Even then, communicators can still demonstrably add value by running the communication operation more efficiently. This can be achieved by:

1. Improving the quality of information – clearer messages written in shorter, plain language.
2. Improving the capacity of existing communication channels, for example by using face-to-face meeting time for something more valuable than just information exchange.
3. Reducing the amount of information going out by limiting the number of producers of messages and limiting their access to communication channels.
4. Stopping central production and taking an advisor role to help managers achieve their objectives.

Where communicators can't get involved in the business strategy they can still add value by improving the efficiency of communication processes and reducing costs – something that usually gladdens the finance director's heart. Most communicators have to combine the roles of strategist and advisor with that of crafting and drafting – good business strategies are useless if they can't be clearly articulated.

For example, an organization that we worked with had an absenteeism problem. We recognized that the company was putting out streams of management speak and employees simply didn't understand about the impact absenteeism was having on the business. Simply by improving the clarity of writing, communicators were able to help employees become more engaged in company business and more interested in work. Absenteeism went down.

Business issues like absenteeism, recruitment and retention are all communication issues. For example an organization's ability to retain staff is affected by the communication style of its managers. As today's jobs get commoditized and competitors play catch up with each other, companies are discovering the impact a supervisor's communication style has on retaining new employees, making them feel part of a team, giving them a sense of common purpose.

SCM: How do you see the communication function developing?

Quirke: Many communicators say that the communication function should make itself redundant by enabling and skilling their internal clients and passing the job onto them. However, I disagree, because communication does provide competitive edge, and competitors are always

Toxic communication: Flat pack communication

Flat pack communication is a term used to describe the situation that arises when communication becomes too fragmented. In such cases, it is common to find many individual communicators working for individual bosses, competing with each other – the end result being a confused recipient. The reason why this type of toxic communication is called "flat pack" is because it resembles the flat pack furniture model: The recipient receives a number of communications and is supposed to bolt them all together to make sense of them. This kind of fragmentation can mean that the results of individual communication efforts may be good but the overall picture is bad.

trying to catch up, communicators need to be looking for how they can add value next. While it makes sense to pass on the lessons and skills of the past to others in the business, the communicator's job is to discover the lessons of the future. This means that there will always be a role for communication professionals as long as organizations continue to compete and change.

SCM: What are today's biggest challenges?

Quirke: Ironically, the most common problems tend to be the basic ones, like using management speak, and getting the balance between high tech and high touch communication wrong. For example, we know that face-to-face communication builds a sense of belonging and understanding, and is vital for retaining staff. However, face-to-face communication has taken a back seat for those organizations who want to move into e-business. Some communicators wrongly assume that being an e-business means that you have to shift all your communications onto the Web.

Both senior managers and communicators alike are often disappointed when an intranet doesn't transform their organization's communication, often because it's being expected to do too much. There are three things that businesses are trying to do with their internal communication:

- provide information and make it accessible;
- demonstrate leadership and give people direction;
- build a sense of community, belonging and collaboration.

Only the first of these is truly achievable with an intranet. The other two are built through trust and through relationships. Face-to-face communication is being put back onto the agenda, because even for the new economy, conversations between people are the real tool for creating value.

SCM: How important is company culture to communication efforts?

Quirke: "Corporate culture" as a phrase is often bandied about by organizations who haven't clearly defined what they want – which inevitably leads to vague and unsuccessful communication programs, often involving laminated cards bearing the organization's new values.

An organization's culture provides the context for internal communication, and determines how employees "decode" the formal messages they receive. However, when they want to change their cultures, organizations need to use the working

definition of culture – "how we do things around here" and nail down what exactly they want to change and in what way.

Internal communication has a clear role to play. In most organizations, language is the raw material of culture, with the words used carrying basic assumptions. So for example, one organization that wanted to retain their staff continually referred to the problem of "LTO" – a three letter acronym that meant "labor turnover" which depersonalized the problem and reinforced the perception that relationships with employees were uncaring. To change culture you must change the words you use.

I think this is a good example of how the basics can have a far reaching effect. Communicators approach to internal communication has to be pragmatic. Internal communication is neither rocket science or social science, and it's too easy to overcomplicate matters if you're not careful.

SCM: Which organizations can be described as best practice?

Quirke: The lesson we learned is that you might not always get best practice but you often get good practice. Many organizations are good in parts. They do some things well, they just don't have the right connections between different elements, so don't get the results they want.

The goalposts are shifting so rapidly that you have to keep adjusting your communication strategies to fit, otherwise you end up outdated. The term "best practice" risks focusing companies on the past, when they should be looking to the future. Good text book internal communication can be caught offside when the market shifts or when industry changes hit. That's why internal communicators have to keep a continual weather eye on the business issues, and not get too focused on just the communication issues.

The companies that are getting communication right are those that acknowledge not everything is perfect yet, but are alert to the changes ahead. **SCM**

Contact

Bill Quirke

Synopsis Communication

E-mail: bill@synopsis-communication.co.uk