Leadership communication – the AstraZeneca way

Coaching leadership teams to engage employees during change

BY DOMINIC WALTERS AND DAVID NORTON

Faced with major and sustained change, the Research & Development organization of pharmaceutical giant, AstraZeneca, decided to coach, equip and support its leadership teams to engage employees in what was happening. To achieve this, they worked in tandem with communication consultancy Synopsis. Here, Dominic Walters and David Norton explain the process and the lessons learned on the way.

The whole pharmaceutical industry is facing change – cost pressures, new markets, outsourcing and changing regulations are just a few of the factors. Like its competitors, AstraZeneca is responding to these broader changes in the industry and research and development (R&D) is a key area of focus. Pharmaceutical R&D requires a huge amount of investment and effort to bring about greater innovation, greater productivity and new discoveries will result in real and worthwhile savings.

Engaging employees in this change, particularly after earlier waves of productivity improvement, constant process improvement and change was a key task for Alex Kalombaris, global head, R&D Communications. Working with leading European communication specialists, Synopsis, he and his team adopted an approach which focused on coaching leadership teams and equipping communicators to support them.

This case study will help those communicators looking to:

• Engage leaders in being effective communicators.
• Raise communication up their leaders’ agendas.
• Work with leadership groups to align them, help them understand their roles and responsibilities and play to their combined strengths.
• Show leaders how communication can help achieve real solutions to key business problems.

What did AstraZeneca R&D do?

“It’s extremely important that we strengthen our leaders’ capabilities in how they communicate,” says Alex Kalombaris. “They recognize that being a leader requires more than just technical ability. They’re our most important channel and the best way to engage and inspire our employees, especially during times of change. Our leaders knew they had to get this right but they needed some tools and training to help them. Employees look to their leaders to inspire and engage them. Our leaders in AstraZeneca R&D had to step up to the plate in a consistent way. The tools and training we provided through Synopsis helped them do just that.”

AstraZeneca R&D based their approach on the Synopsis FAME model of effective leadership communication. FAME is based on Synopsis’ experience of successful leaders in all aspects of life. It concentrates on four key communication skill areas that make leaders effective:

1. Focus – effective leaders identify clearly what they want people to think, feel and do and
plan how to achieve this.
2. **Articulate** – effective leaders can turn a vision into compelling words that people remember and repeat.
3. **Model** – effective leaders lead by example, know their weaknesses and can flex their natural communication style to play to their strengths.
4. **Engage** – effective leaders help people see how they fit into the bigger picture and involve people effectively.

**Practical workshops**
Each leadership team in R&D participated in a one day workshop. A total of 200 senior managers took part.

The workshops were practical and focused each team on what they needed to do to bring about the necessary changes in their area. The entire day looked at how each group of leaders should articulate the direction for their teams, align behind the messages to their people and prepare to engage their people in the changes ahead. Many participants were delighted that not only did they acquire new skills and techniques but also practical approaches to real communication situations that they were due to face.

A major aspect of the workshop was helping leaders understand their preferred communication style. A key distinction was whether the leaders were extroverts – lively, persuasive and entertaining, or introverts – accurate, logical and factual. We used a detailed analytical tool to help leaders understand their natural styles and what this meant for the way they communicated.

Looking at communication styles helped the leaders in three ways. Firstly, they could plan to make the most of the strengths of their preferred style and minimize the impact of its downsides. Secondly, they could spot other people’s preferred styles and shift their approach to match and therefore increase their chances of getting onto the other person’s wavelength quicker. Thirdly, looking at communication styles helped them understand that different people were likely to react differently to the messages they were putting across, and that more than one approach was needed to reach everyone.

Early in the program, we also ran a workshop for the R&D network of communicators who would be working alongside the leadership teams. In this workshop, communicators learned the key leadership communication skills, and practiced ways to support their leaders long after the workshops were over.

**Ten lessons learned**
1. Understand different communication styles

Communicators and their clients often have different styles which can cause misunderstanding. At AstraZeneca, communicators tend to have a different set of values and priorities from their internal clients. Whereas the communicators tended to be upbeat, spirited and considerate, their clients, most of whom were trained scientists, were by nature more likely to be lower profile, systematic and considerate.

Understanding more about communication styles helped the communicators change their approach to get onto their clients’ wavelength and achieve common ground from which they could agree a way forward. Without this understanding, it was easy for the scientists to dismiss the communicators as “all show” and for the communicators to see the scientists as too fact-focused and both parties coming away from meetings frustrated.

2. Leaders should cater for their audience
Members of leadership teams have different styles which can result in mixed messages. In one team in particular, different styles were reflected in different strategies for communication. A spirited and direct, energetic and charismatic member of the team was keen to talk to people in an unscripted and interactive way. More introverted members of the team were, however, uncomfortable with what they saw as an unstructured and undisciplined approach. The inconsistency that was likely to result could undermine alignment, and send mixed and confusing signals.

This was addressed by working with the team to agree the key messages and the “story” and also reinforcing that the leaders needed to consider the preferred communication styles of their audiences and flex their approach to cater for them. They should be energetic and upbeat for those in their audiences who were extrovert, but also make sure...
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“Leaders and communicators must understand their communication style and the styles of others, and how this influences what they say, the way they say it and how others react to it.”

1. They clearly link what’s happening with business objectives and have detail and evidence for the more fact-hungry introverted types.

3. Communicators should use their preferred style
   Communicators have different styles which can result in mixed messages. At AstraZeneca communicators came from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines and had different styles themselves. Several communicators had been scientists themselves, and moved over to specialize in communication. Others came from journalism and some from PR.
   Communicators were helped to understand their preferred style and think through how to get the most out of it. They also had the chance to assess the preferred styles of the leaders they supported and how they could use this information to provide them with an even more effective service.

4. Being collaborative is not enough
   R&D leadership teams focused on collaboration. Many of the teams were successful because their leaders were skilled in building strong teams, bringing together functional and technical experts, and fostering co-operation. Their natural style was to be considerate and collaborative.
   In many ways, this style is useful during times of change – people expect greater empathy from their leaders, and to be reassured that they understand the pressures they’re under and the pain they’re feeling. On the other hand, the collaborative approach can also bring problems during change. Leaders have to provide a strong sense of direction, and to be able to engage and motivate their people around the context for change, the compelling reasons for it and the need to summon up another burst of energy for the new challenges ahead. Doing this means a shift to being more direct and upbeat.

5. Consider the best approach
   Scientists like fact and process. Many appeared to be uncomfortable with emotion and story. The more introverted audiences such as many of the scientists do not like “arguing from analogy” – they don’t want images and metaphors of how one thing is like another. They believe that a thing should rest on its own merits and be tested for itself. Scientists may also want time to reflect on information, to process through its implications and to have a later opportunity for challenge and discussion. They’re used to informed argument, to establishing hypotheses and then gathering data to test them.

6. Leaders may be affected by proximity to info
   Leaders can be too close to the information and too far ahead in their thinking. Many of the leaders were so close to the information that they forgot what their people did and didn’t know. This can cause difficulties when communicating change as an unwise word, or unhappy choice of phrase could trigger concerns that had not existed before. Leaders can also become impatient with teams that are grappling with facts and detail they themselves digested some time ago and misinterpret their slow take up as resistance.

7. Leaders can project their concerns onto staff
   For many leaders, the toughest objections to answer were those with which they privately agreed. Sometimes leaders would raise issues and concerns which their people may not have considered because the leaders didn’t want to be seen as corporate propagandists, or because they had their own concerns about how change has been rolled out, and the degree of detail which was available to them. Often, the end result can be extra confusion and concern.

8. Consistency is achievable, despite mixed views
   Consistency is possible even when people see things differently. One of the group heads was especially worried about consistency of message. He knew this would be difficult to achieve because his department was spread across three sites, each of which had a distinctive identity and their own strong local leader.
   Also, each of the sites were likely to be affected differently, and therefore would need not only different messages, but a different approach. For example, a site that was being severely affected by changes would not welcome an upbeat recounting of the benefits of the change to the organization.
   Each of the team clearly had different styles and different mixes of how much telling and discussing they were likely to follow. Therefore, even when the messages and slides handed out to the team were identical and consistent, they would inevitably be used and delivered in different ways, to audiences who were themselves different and distinctive – and who would start selecting different elements of messages that they might remember and pass on to others.
   Faced with what looked like an almost inevitable guarantee of inconsistency, lack of control of what people might take out of the
sessions, selective memory and decaying recall, the leader was naturally concerned. He was able to reduce his concerns by:

• Preparation – spending time together working through what the members of the leadership group actually thought, believed and felt confident saying.

• Agreeing as a group an elevator speech, key messages and answers to tough questions.

• Rehearsal – in which they could challenge each other, simulate tough situations they were likely to face and develop responses together, rather than coming up with something on their feet when delivering “live”.

• Summaries – rather than leaving their answers in the Q&A sessions dangling, giving summaries of what they believed to be positive aspects of the changes and why they personally felt confident about it.

9. Leaders should develop their own Q&As
Rather than having the communication team develop FAQs, leaders responded better when they challenged each other with tough questions, developed their answers and tested out how real, credible and reliable these responses were.

It was also very helpful to challenge leaders to raise the questions they feared they’d be asked. In part this helped them prepare to deal with their fears, and it also helped them investigate what they were concerned about, get to the underlying issue and try and address and resolve it.

10. Meeting format matters
The leaders were especially interested in how best to put across their messages. The traditional way of communicating is to run large site events in which 200–300 people get the message at the same time. This minimizes the grapevine, as everyone hears the same message from the same person in the same way.

However, these leaders also needed to ensure high degrees of engagement in order to maintain productivity and keep people focused. Therefore, they believed it was important to have discussion with their people, flush out their issues and increase their sense of confidence about the change.

This meant they couldn’t rely simply on the one off large scale events, since interaction at these would be low, and there would be little time or room for discussion. Indeed, it was more likely at any Q&A session the vocal minority would dominate, even if their views did not represent those of the majority.

Many leaders therefore decided to follow up larger scale events with smaller group discussions in which people could discover what the changes meant for their particular area of the business, raise their concerns and ask questions. They would also be able to challenge how well their leaders had created the vision for change, defended their interests and developed a feasible plan for successful implementation.

How did this help AstraZeneca?
“The main achievement,” says Alex Kalombaris, “is that we now have a group of leaders in R&D who are a lot more self-aware, and confident in their own communication style. They have a better idea of how to maximize their strengths and work on their weaknesses. The feedback we have received from the leadership team has been very impressive. Following the training, leaders see communication in a different way, as a discipline that requires time and effort to get it right. Finally, it allowed the communication business partners to work closer with the leaders they were supporting and give the communication team the opportunity to show their value.

Summary
In summary, AstraZeneca R&D found that:

• Leaders and communicators must understand their communication style and the styles of others, and in particular, how this influences what they say, the way they say it and how others react to it.

• Leaders should learn to flex their styles to maximize their chances of getting onto other people’s wavelengths quickly.

• Leaders need to think about the message from their audience’s point of view and avoid assuming knowledge they don’t have and projecting onto them issues and concerns they don’t feel.

• Consistency of approach is more likely where a team of leaders gets together to agree the key messages – the elevator speech – and develop and answer their own questions.

• Meeting format is important – large scale gatherings ensure consistency of message but they should be followed up by smaller scale discussions to let people digest what’s been said, challenge and ask questions.

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