

Communication: A Strategic Discipline

When organizations consider their communications needs, there is a tendency to look at the parts more than the whole. “Are we getting good publicity?” “Does our newsletter need reformatting?” “Why don’t we launch a Web page?” Questions like these are part of the communications challenge, but they do not, in themselves, address the most fundamental question of all: “Who are we as an organization and what do we want to achieve?” Or, simply, “What’s our purpose and aim?” Those are strategic questions.

Good communication comes from a clear sense of aims and priorities. Communication around carefully focused objectives reinforces an organization’s sense of itself – it’s purpose and vision. It becomes a key discipline for achieving overall strategic goals.

Organizational communication can be attempted without an explicit communications planning process. But planning produces the focus needed for the best results. The process starts with recognizing communication as an interactive system of relationships. Before paper, ink or technology enter the picture, there are relationships among people to sort through. Who are the people who will help the organization succeed? What are their affiliations? What are the relationships among them? How do they come to agree on a course of action? What are their common and unique needs? Communication themes and emphases are developed in the context of an organization’s abiding sense of itself in relationship to others.

It’s vital to appreciate communication, not as a one-way signal, but as a cycle of meaning with an all-important feedback element. In well-accepted communication theory, a sender sends a message through selected channels to intended receivers and, then, seeks to perceive how well the message was received, understood and accepted. Communication is more than information, it is connection – being understood and being deemed worthy of attention.

In its essentials, communications theory applies to all organizations, whether they function in corporate or church settings. A church organization is impelled by different values than a corporation,

Communication: A Strategic Discipline - 2

but the same principles of human interaction apply to both.

Something fundamentally different is occurring in today's world that makes organizational communication especially challenging to accomplish. Rapidly changing information technology produces an enormous volume of information to enlighten or befuddle the public. People have to be increasingly selective about where to pay attention, before they decide how to respond. Just as we were getting used to the "information economy" as replacing the "industrial economy," writers are beginning to explore the "attention economy" – how people decide who to heed in a rising din of voices, on-line and off. ¹

For organizations, the growing competition for attention means taking seriously the need to produce clear, focused messages that respond to people's actual needs and interests. Communication has to be much more immediate and graphic than in the past. Attention must be caught as competing images flip by. Communication should be as intentional and as inclusive as possible. There is too much chance that too many people won't be paying attention.

A graphic of the communications planning process is included here. While the process may seem complex, it is actually straightforward, providing it starts at the beginning. That's with an organization's vision of itself. Visioning is extremely powerful.

Confusion often arises over the terms "vision," "mission," "goals," "objectives" and "strategies". They are not all the same. These very useful terms should be thought of as a sequence from the highest and most energizing level to increasingly fine-grained phases of planning. A vision (or aim), for example, is not a mission. A vision expresses what an organization intends to become – its future, its direction. A mission states its purpose, its reason for existing. A vision suggests how an organization intends to transform itself in terms of style and achievement. When an organization is "reinvented," it can be said to be acting out a new vision of itself, assuming that one exists. A vision usually involves more than a leader's gut instinct, although instinct prompted by personal experience and knowledge may be sufficient. Many people can help shape a vision. It emerges from a strong sense of what's possible when an organization realizes its true potential. A vision should be brief and stirring, to be kept readily in mind.

"What's our purpose and aim?" becomes "What's our mission and vision?"

Writes management professor Burt Nanus: "There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared." ²

A problem is that, especially in complex organizations that span a great deal of geography or in voluntary organizations with high turnover, a succinct, compelling vision may be hard to express. Prayerful perseverance may be required to maintain enthusiasm in search of a clarion theme. Sometimes

1. Goldhaber, Michael H., "Attention Shoppers," *Wired*, December, 1997, pp. 182-190.

Communication: A Strategic Discipline - 3

organizations have trouble capturing their own possibilities. Help from a facilitator experienced in visioning may be advisable.

But once expressed, a vision galvanizes planning; it makes the rest of the process relatively easy. From there, communications planners follow a four-step process. They ask who the organization's stakeholders* and audiences are and review the history of relationships with each of them (the Research phase). They then Plan a program, listing goals, measurable objectives to accomplish the goals and strategies for meeting the objectives. They work out themes that will bring their organizational priorities into sharp focus. Not until the lowest program level, that of tactics and tools, do communications planners with a strong sense of their organization's destiny get to the point at which others often mistakenly start: refurbishing existing activities or proposing new ones.

Even at this point, however, the planning process remains incomplete. The next steps are to take Action, to begin communicating around the newly discerned principles and objectives, and, through a ravenous quest for feedback, see how it goes. Which brings the planners to the fourth, or Evaluation, step, where they assess all that has been learned and start a new cycle. Planning isn't complete until action has been taken, feedback and hearing have occurred and the cycle is ready to be moved along.

This introductory discussion of organizational communication is premised on several factors, some more obvious than others:

- Communication is a management function, responsible to an organization's top management and practiced on behalf of the entire organization and its vision of itself.
- As a management function, communication relates closely to an organization's ability to handle the work before it with zest and imagination.
- Good communication is highly intentional. It results from a focused sense of priorities that generates themes and messages.
- Communication practiced strategically is a professional function. It should be coordinated by a professionally trained communicator with relational, planning, information gathering and writing skills.
- While a communicator may have the title, communication – being continually mindful of relationships, themes and clarity – is a responsibility of everyone in an organization. It's a team function that can't be relegated to "Communications" alone.

2. Nanus, Burt, Visionary Leadership, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1992, p.3.

* Stakeholders are persons or groups who feel they have a personal stake in an organization's actions.

Communication: A Strategic Discipline - 4

- Communication takes a long-term perspective, based on constancy of purpose and continuing improvement. A communications cycle isn't complete until feedback and evaluation occur and learning is accomplished.

- An organization that takes the communication function seriously is one poised for creativity and self-discovery.

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