

INTRODUCTION TO INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY



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INTRODUCTION

The old adage of the journey is a good starting point when considering internal communication strategy. With any journey you may have a good idea of where you're heading, but without any planning, you can never be certain how you are going to get there, or how quickly. So it is with an organisation's internal communication strategy. The senior communicator may have a very good idea of the communication environment they want to create, the general way they want to engage various audiences or stakeholder groups, the channels that they want to employ. But it is only through pulling this all together that they have a robust internal communication strategy, something that will not only help them deliver the communications they desire but also help others to see where they are heading, how they are going to get there and, how they fit in with the rest of the organisation.

An internal communication strategy will provide a clear picture of the very business (or department or project) it is trying to support. It will be built on established values and principles and the ways it encourages discussion, conversation and feedback will highlight the organisation's very ambitions and aspirations. The importance of displaying clarity in terms of these issues link directly to the core of the communication strategy, what employees need to think, feel and do; the priorities in terms of channel development and, ultimately, to the resources and budget that the internal communication function will require to deliver these objectives.

It's also important to acknowledge internal communications can be influenced by external circumstances. Your strategy will need to consider factors from the wider world, for example if you've outlined an internal comms plan for the appointment of a new Chief Executive, your staff are likely to Google their name and may come across material that you hadn't expected them to read.

WHAT SHOULD A STRATEGY CONTAIN?

Put 'Internal Communication strategy' into Google and the search will return over 20 million results. Amongst the agencies, the adverts and articles are a variety of models and frameworks available to help you construct and shape a strategy.

The actual contents of a strategy will be always be fit for purpose and suited to the writer and their environment. However, here are some suggestions for some of the headings you might expect to find in a typical strategy document:

- 01 Title**, so when it is referred to internally, you know the document and strategy that is being referenced.
- 02 Issue / purpose**: State what business change or objective you are trying to influence, such as increase sales or employee engagement, or perhaps provide reassurance during transformational change. Plus have one or two sentences so you can see at a glance the aim. In other words, why the strategy exists. E.g. The communications team proposes this strategy for the Board to consider and agree. It exists to ensure employees understand the upcoming changes to our internal structure.

- 03 An executive summary;** a short opening piece (no more than one page) that provides the reader with a summary of the highlights of the document, emphasising from the start how an effective strategy will deliver real added value to the organisation. Should include succinct summary of required resources and timings.
- 04 Introduce the organisation/ summarise the project.** Don't dive straight into the communication, start by demonstrating that whatever you are planning to deliver is tightly bound into the overall environment both in terms of wider business ambitions and what that means to the ability of the organisation to communicate effectively (eg SWOT analysis). Managing expectations at the start of what can and can't be delivered might save considerable time and argument later.

RECOMMENDATION

Structure your strategy into:

- // Where we are now
- // Where we want to be
- // How we are going to get there
(this includes measurement).

Other areas to include:

- // Resourcing
- // Timings.

- 05 The communication objectives;** these are the headlines of what the strategy is there to achieve. This is not simply a regurgitation of the business objectives – communication objectives are different – but more a focus on the attitudes and behaviours required by employees to deliver these business objectives. Make them as clear and measurable as possible.
- 06 Explain how the communication strategy will measure the right things;** measurement is an important part of what communicators do, but do they always measure the right things? It is easy to measure hits on an intranet page or count up the scores on a post-event feedback sheet and it is increasingly popular to run regular attitude 'pulse' surveys. These are important, but communications should be all about helping to change behaviour so any measurement that can actually show how, as a result of a communication intervention, behaviour is changing will be valuable.

Tip: Look at the [Measurement Matrix](#) developed by CIPR Inside.

- 07 Defining the key messages;** whether for the entire organisation, a division or simply as part of a project, your communication will be based on trying to get your audience and stakeholders to understand and act upon a small number of key messages. Once the key messages are understood, people will start to repeat them to each other and eventually they begin to become internal truths. If these key messages are short, memorable and authentic then they stand a good chance of sticking.

08 Key audience and stakeholder groups. One size doesn't fit all. Demonstrate in the strategy that you have clearly identified who you are communicating with. You can do this by segmenting the audiences – it could be a small group of employees or tens of thousands of people spread across the globe. However, the same rules remain – the more directly you can tailor the content and appeal to each group, the better chance of success you have in achieving what you're setting out to do.

Separate to audiences (other terms exist), though related, are your stakeholders, the people who can directly impact communication activities. An additional plan to address their needs is also good practice. However, as a first step, conduct a stakeholder mapping exercise to ensure you have not missed any group out. This could include employees, unions, shareholders, customers etc and a map will help you chart your course. Remember that internal communication is not always solely "internal," particularly via those groups just mentioned, so be sure to plan and resources appropriately.

09 Channels; Communication channels are a vital part of your strategy. You know what you're setting out to achieve and who with, the channels form part of the how as they determine the methods of communicating with the relevant groups and how information will be delivered.

This section should focus both on the channels currently employed and also those that you expect to use during the lifetime of the strategy. Ensure that you build in effective mechanisms for feedback and two-way communication, providing opportunity for employees to have their voices heard and views acted upon. Your channels exist to facilitate conversations, so make sure you have dialogue tools in place, rather than merely creating "push" channels.

Tip: Consider detailing a channels matrix of what you will be using.

10 Set out the approval process; particularly if you are coming into a new role, it is useful to leave no doubt about how a communication gets signed off. You'll also need to ensure the speed of the sign-off process matches the nature of the channels you're using, for example quicker processes will be needed for Yammer than a printed magazine.

11 Responsibilities (and brief details) of the communication team; Outline who is responsible for the strategy. If it is centred on the communication team, include a 'who's who' of the communicators, with their responsibilities, skills and contact details. If broader, identify the relevant business stakeholders.

12 A timeline / calendar of events; when is everything happening? This might be where some senior colleagues jump straight to – "when is the conference?" Showing that there is a plan will also ward off those colleagues who want to do their own thing and help those others who have a last minute 'urgent announcement,' demonstrating to all that everything fits together.

PRESENTING A STRATEGY

Communication strategies may end up as fairly detailed documents but need to be produced in an accessible and understandable format, especially given they are typically being put together by the organisation's senior communicator.

When the strategy is ready for presenting to the senior management team don't forget the normal rules that are applied to all other communication output. Don't produce a 100+ slide presentation or distribute the 50 page 'manual', but do provide summaries, highlights and opportunities for the senior team (and other key stakeholders) to discuss and help shape some aspects of the strategy. The more they 'buy-in' to it, the more instrumental they will be to helping make it happen.

WHO NEEDS TO SIGN OFF THE STRATEGY?

Ultimately do get a signature, whether from the CEO, the head of the department or the Project Owner. Once you have this you have a great defence against all those who will try to ignore the communication function and think the strategy doesn't necessarily apply to them. Once you have a signature you can focus on the next challenge – delivering the strategy!

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