

## Leadership Communications Planning

### Overview

The truth is it is almost impossible to kill a great brand, and marketers and agencies have to remember that.... The compulsion to change is often the wrong route. What they should do is accept who they are, and then express that in a meaningful and relevant way.

*Shelly Lazarus*

Conor Dignam, "Stormy Reign for Queen of the Blue-Chip Brands"

*The new performance evaluation system was not going over well. In fact, the new appraisal process was met with outright hostility - if hallway conversations were any indication, most managers were refusing to use it at all. The director of human resources was beside herself. This new appraisal system, which was designed to be easier to use as well as more comprehensive and more equitable, seemed destined to be dead on arrival. Although the new system was designed to be used online and replace the old paper-and-pencil form, managers were very suspicious. Employees, who were encouraged to write self-appraisals and set forth new performance objectives, were leery, too. Their fear seemed to be twofold: first, lack of privacy, and second, how they were supposed to evaluate themselves. They feared that if they graded themselves too high, they might seem shallow, whereas if they graded themselves too low, they might get stuck with a poor review that would affect their compensation and their eligibility for promotion. As a result, the entire system, which cost \$2 million to implement, was in danger of being written off. Worse, employee morale was sinking. Refrains of "Big Brother is watching" echoed in the hallways.*

Unfortunately, this situation is all too common. Whether the subject is performance evaluations, new project guidelines, or new policies governing overtime, the underlying principle is the same: The new initiative represents change, and people do not like change unless it is explained properly and put into the context of the organization.

The reason for the failure of this new performance evaluation system was not the system itself. It was the way in which it was introduced - or, frankly, not introduced. While a huge investment was made in the development of the system, little or no attention was paid to communicating the system to managers and employees. Rather, it simply appeared, as if from on high. The HR director was so involved with developing the application and the benefits of using it that she and her leadership team simply forgot to introduce it properly.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to throw stones and accuse the HR director of being myopic and not in touch with the reality of the situation, but the fact is that organizations often institute change initiatives, big and small, without so much as a second thought about communicating them. Leaders seem to assume that whatever they introduce will be accepted. Months later, when the initiative fails, they wonder why. They tend to blame the initiative itself, when all too often it was simply the failure to communicate it properly. As a result, a great deal of time, money, and good ideas is wasted. Worse, the whole cycle is repeated when organizations seek to refine or redesign an initiative that probably would be good, if only it were explained properly.

Leadership communications plays a vanguard role in communicating change as well as in reinforcing organizational culture. Planning communications in advance is essential to developing a leadership message that is consistent with the culture, finding ways to communicate change, and ensuring continued credibility. Noted commentator and consultant on change Rosabeth Moss Kanter places a heavy emphasis on the role that communications plays in keeping a culture unified as well as helping to keep it together during a transformational effort.

### **Active versus Passive Communications**

Communications does not occur in a vacuum; it is part of the culture of an organization. As such, communications absorbs the character of the organization's culture. It is essential that those who /actively/ create leadership messages be cognizant of those who /passively/ receive those messages. Communications professionals need to be aware of what people are saying about products, people, and performance, both inside and outside the organization.

Active communications (*what goes out*) must reflect the reality of the world in which passive communications (*what comes in*) exists. Discordance between active and passive communications leads to an undermining of credibility; accordance ensures organizational alignment. Sensitivity to what's on people's minds is always important, but never more so than when communicating an initiative involving transformation. For this reason, leaders may need to prepare employees or customers for coming changes rather than springing the entire change initiative on them overnight with a single message. Leaders can introduce change with teaser messages prior to a major announcement, which may be given at an employee gathering or rally. Likewise, leaders need to follow up the message with a series of follow-on messages noting progress and keeping people up to date on what is happening.

### **Assessing the Organizational Communications Climate**

How do you find out what's going on within an organization? You ask people what's on their minds. As a leadership communicator, you need to discover the climate for communications. /Climate/ refers to how open people feel about voicing their opinions or making suggestions. In places where the culture is repressive, many people are afraid to voice concerns even to coworkers, let alone to their boss. They also become distrustful of management because they feel that whatever anyone in management tells them is either untrue or bad news. By contrast, in nurturing cultures, people not only are open to one another, but feel free to make suggestions to their boss. Messages from the leaders are received with much more credence because people have learned to trust management.

Borrowing an approach from the social sciences, the best way to find out about the culture is to conduct a three-pronged study that uses interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Before embarking on any such study, you need to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Here's a sample disclaimer:

We are doing this interview (focus group, survey) to get your opinion about the climate of communications. We value your opinions and your ideas. We will also keep all comments confidential. Your comments and ideas will not be linked to your name.

## Interviews

Interviews are best for getting to the heart of what people think about the organization. Individual interviews give you the opportunity to explore a question or issue with someone in more depth than is possible with any other method. A skilled interviewer can make the interviewee feel comfortable by assuring confidentiality, opening with small talk, and having an open and friendly demeanor. When people feel at ease, they will reveal a great deal about how they see themselves within the context of the team or the organization.

Sample questions might include:

- *Has your boss set clear expectations for your job? Why do you say that?*
- *Do you know the objectives of your team/department? How do you know or not know?*
- *Do you know where the organization is headed? How do you know this?*
- *What is the climate for communications within your organization?*

The other factor in this type of research is choosing whom to interview. Consider interviewing at least two people from every function or organizational level. In this way, you get a more balanced understanding of what individuals think and what they do within the organization.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups are good for getting different viewpoints in a short period of time. You can use the interaction within the group to stimulate conversation as well as to bring differing points of view to the surface. Keep in mind that some people are shy in groups and are uncomfortable voicing their opinions, particularly when those opinions might be contrary to what the rest of the group thinks or what the organization fosters. Use an experienced facilitator to draw out the opinions of the group. Group dynamics will have a big impact on the quality of the responses and the nature of the discussion; you need someone who is experienced and skilled in managing these dynamics effectively. In a focus group, limit the time to no more than 2 hours.

Sample questions might include:

- *How do senior leaders communicate to you?*
- *What kind of feedback do you receive from your boss?*
- *Think of what people are saying about your organization. Do their views differ from those of senior leadership? In what way?*
- *What happens when someone expresses an opinion that differs from that of his or her boss?*

## Surveys

When you want to take the pulse of an organization and find out the extent to which an attitude or belief is held across the organization, use a survey. The survey typically will ask between 10 and 20 questions. It can be done using a paper-and-pencil format, or it can be done using email or the Web. The format selected depends on the culture of your organization and how people use technology. Usually, the computer-based formats get a better return rate than hard copy.

It is best to send surveys to as many people as possible. If the company has more than 10,000 employees, however, sending the survey to everyone may be impractical or too costly. In this case, you may wish to limit the surveys to people within a particular function (e.g., marketing, sales, or purchasing) or at a particular management level (e.g., supervisors, middle managers, or senior managers). If you receive responses from more than 50 percent of those surveyed, and this number is at least 30 (and preferably 100 or more), you can consider your results valid. There will, of course, be some bias as a result of differences between those who do and do not respond, but the numbers of returned surveys should give you a good idea of the issues and concerns facing people in the department, function, or organization.

Furthermore, if you survey the entire organization, you can slice (organize) the data according to specific groups. Specific groups will often have more or less concern about particular issues; this is typically due to the nature of their jobs, but it is useful to know this when designing communications plans. For example, supervisors may need more communications on issues related to hiring, while middle managers may need greater levels of communications on development planning. The information gained from the surveys can help you plan accordingly.

*Suggestion:* Get some help from an expert in designing the survey. There is an art and a science to constructing the questions so that you get valid and reliable results that you can feel confident in using to make decisions. And there are techniques for distributing and collecting the survey that will increase the likelihood that you will get a sufficient number of surveys returned.

## **Communications Audits**

Another form of survey used specifically for evaluating communications is the communications audit. While the audit may assess organizational climate, it is often used to measure the response to specific forms of communication, e.g., a video, a brochure, or a meeting. The purpose of the communications audit is to evaluate how well people understood the message and what they will do with the information they have received. For example, if you send out a video on changes to a benefits plan and follow up with a survey, you can ask whether people have the information they need in order to decide whether to make changes in their plan or keep it as it is, and whether they know where to go to seek further information.

Do you have to use all three methods of analysis? No, but the more types of analysis you use, the greater the validity of your conclusions. Also keep in mind that any one of these analysis methods is a form of intervention. And when you intervene, you must provide a context for it. For example, you must always explain why you are gathering data and what you will do with it.