



OPTIMIZING GLOBAL-LOCAL COMMUNICATION

How to create a balance between globally consistent yet locally relevant communication

Identifying communication champions

The Melcrum report *Viral Communication in the Workplace* explores how to identify natural communicators or influencers within the business and work with them to help share strategic messages, usually around change. The aim is to move from purely formal, downward communication and tap into the informal employee networks that naturally form within organizations. Here are just a few ideas from that study on how to identify communication champions:

- **Watch to see which people regularly join different working parties or are nominated or volunteer for focus groups.** You'll probably find they're interested in finding out and sharing information and natural networkers. From a practical perspective, it should be relatively easy to identify them and interest them in forming part of a wider network.
- **Ask people to name the colleagues they see as most influential.** Watch for the names that keep coming up again and again. At Friends Provident (case study in that report on page 62) participants attending a series of 12 focus groups were asked for their influencer recommendations. At the end of the series, there was a clear list of names of people who had been frequently suggested by focus group attendees.
- **Build a formal employee forum through a nomination process.** Invest time with the forum to develop it into a cohesive social network. Canon (page 126) runs a series of successful information and consultation groups.
- **Watch for the social butterflies.** The IC team at Tate & Lyle (page 50) wanted to bring together the "Bees" – the people who buzz around spreading gossip and connecting socially with others. They simply watched to see who seemed to know everyone, who always organized the Christmas party, who always knew the gossip. A plea to the Bees to ask everyone in their network to complete the employee survey prompted a surge in response rates almost overnight.

Reinventing our role to provide more value in a connected world

Opinion: Liz Guthridge, Founder, Connect Consulting Group, LLC

In his best-selling book *Outliers*¹, Malcolm Gladwell explains that an individual needs to practice a complex task for about 10,000 hours before he or she becomes a world-class expert. He cites the Beatles, Mozart, Sun Microsystems co-founder Bill Joy, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, and others. (Ability, luck, support from others, and timing are also important for success.)

Generally, you can reach the 10,000 hour milestone after 10 years. According to Dr K Anders Ericsson, who's the expert on expertise whom Gladwell cites in his book, the brain needs that many hours to assimilate all the lessons learned from practicing a complex craft to reach a level of mastery.

Expert vs. Amateur?

So how does this 10,000 hour rule apply to the field of communication? Most of us certainly spend the majority of our waking hours communicating – much more than the 1,000 annual hours for a decade. This is true of those of us who work for pay, regardless of whether we have the word "communicator" or "communication" in our job title.

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That's a key point these days. Who among us are experts? Even those who are professionally trained experience more communication mishaps than we'd care to admit. And how important is expert status – as long as we can get the job done on time without complaints and with measurable results?

Today's workplace is not our grandfather's or parent's world or even the environment most of us entered out of college. We're now more connected than ever, working against the clock in multiple time zones with restrained resources.

Compare this to my first professional communication job. During my junior year of college as a journalism student, I landed a prestigious internship. For someone who had wanted to be an investigative journalist, this paid position was on the dark side. I was the assistant editor for a *Fortune* 50 company's four publications: the monthly newsletter for 5,000 general office employees; the quarterly retiree newsletter; the bi-monthly tip sheet for field communication staff; and the bi-monthly magazine for employees, retirees and investors.

My family was thrilled. They had no idea what I did but they knew I was working in the same department as a local Oklahoma boy who had made it big. Carl had been a radio reporter on the farm beat who went to the big city of Chicago and got a job at a major company.

Early on in my internship, I made a point to introduce myself to Carl who was then head of media relations. I remember asking him if he considered himself a businessman or an internal journalist. He looked me like I was way too wet behind the ears and responded sharply, "I'm a businessman, of course."

I thanked him and slunk down the hall of the 37th floor to my private office with a view of Lake Michigan. And I didn't say a word to my administrative assistant or probably to anyone else.

Why am I sharing this exchange now? Carl's point of view is even more apropos today even though the circumstances in which we work are dramatically different. (Believe me, none of my other offices has ever been that cushy.)

Even though during and post-recession, many of us changed the way we work, we have to further reinvent our role. This assumes that we want to stay relevant and valuable today to a key customer group, the executives who pay our salaries.

What executives and other leaders want and need

Executives have a lot on their mind when it comes to communication at work. Besides getting good communication counsel for themselves, they're concerned about creating many collaborative, networked teams that span corporate and national boundaries and that get results. They're looking for more innovation, better customer service, improved productivity and any other edge that will give them greater profitability and a sustainable edge against the competition.

For these teams to work quickly, efficiently, and cost effectively, they need to communicate well within the team and across other teams, the rest of the organization, with customers, suppliers, and other key stakeholders.

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Yet, these teams as well as the operational and functional groups probably don't have the resources – time or money – to embed a communication professional in their midst. Yet, they don't have the deep expertise that communication professionals have accumulated in their 10,000 plus hours of experience. So these teams and groups either make do, or borrow, buy, or steal communication services from the corporate or business unit internal communication function.

Shifting our mindset and service set

For internal communication functions to serve these customer groups well, in addition to the executives, we need to shift both our mindset and our service set. We must transform ourselves from doing to being. In other words, rather than write like Mark Twain, American author extraordinaire, we need to act like one of Twain's most famous characters, Tom Sawyer. For example, Tom convinced a group of neighborhood kids to paint a fence for him and enjoy the experience.

In our new role, we provide direction and oversight in a number of areas. In particular, possible services that meet these customers' wants and needs are listed in the Table on page 210.

So what's missing from this table? Creator of content. Just as a generation ago we made the switch from in-house journalist to business communicator, we now have to make this other transformation, less of doing and more of being the strategic advisor.

While many of us joined the profession because we love the craft of communication, we have to face facts. Communication is like air. Just as everyone breathes, everyone communicates. And while global teams/ functions may not communicate as well as we professionals, with our guidance they can succeed at exchanging information, building stronger relationships, and improving their performance as well as the results of their team and the organization. **That's a winning partnership.**

Liz Guthridge is the founder of Connect Consulting Group LLC, which works with communication professionals and functional and team leaders to achieve clear and credible change. Liz trains communication professionals to become more strategic in their work, including serving as advisors for leaders at all levels. She also supports department and functional leaders in introducing complex initiatives to employees who are often confused, angry or in denial about the change. In getting results for her clients, Liz often uses LEAN COMMUNICATIONS® principles and practices – using communications to work smarter not harder to improve results and build credibility. Contact Liz at liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com or visit www.connectconsultinggroup.com.

1. Malcolm Gladwell. *Outliers*, 2008.

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Service Area	Internal Communication Actions
Education	<p>Teach lessons, just-in-time to the extent possible. Topics that resonate with non-communicators often include: writing and editing basics; identifying stakeholders; creating compelling messages; developing communication plans (See the sidebar “What?, So What?, Now What?: Simple communication planning tool”); matching messages with channels; helping team/functional leaders be better communicators; communicating change, especially getting people to take actions and change behavior; writing for the web; using email more effectively; using social media and collaboration tools more effectively; and figuring out how to develop a cadence for ongoing communication, including updating team/project websites.</p> <p>Other topics that non-communicators often need include understanding the differences between communicating within your team and with others in the organization; avoiding plagiarism; using photos and graphics effectively; creating videos; and personalizing corporate messages for the team.</p>
Facilitation	<p>Offer facilitation help and support for kick-off and other important team meetings as well as special meetings and events. With an outside, objective person facilitating, a group usually can get to the heart of the matter faster, reach decisions, and start to build plans. And even when they have access to meeting planners and facilitators, many non-communicators still need help figuring out how to use communication to reinforce the key messages of the meetings and motivate people to apply what they’ve gleaned from the meetings.</p>
Curation	<p>Serve as a curator. That is, share items of interest – such as corporate messages, reports, industry outlooks – that add value either as is or with color commentary or a short summary, preferably with graphics. When you’re curating you’re connecting the dots, making the connections to your business strategy, key themes, and values. This also helps people recognize patterns. You’re also providing context, explaining why something is important and worth paying attention to, which can be incredibly valuable when teams and business units are concentrating on their day-to-day immediate work.</p>
Measurement	<p>Assess the effectiveness of their communication. Also consider evaluating meetings and other actions that include a communication component. The teams/functions can benefit from an objective source who can direct them about the best ways to measure, how to analyze the data that’s gathered, and how to adjust the communication based on the measurement results.</p>
Guidance	<p>Act as an advisor or coach. Be available to provide as-needed counsel on issues as they arise. Or, if you become aware of concerns from others in or outside the organization, be prepared to step in quickly and help. Don’t wait to be asked. In this situation, you are playing the important role of mitigating risks – generally reputational yet sometimes financial, operational, legal, and strategic – to the organization. And to make sure you’re preventing fires more than fighting fires, be sure to establish quality standards that you convey and monitor.</p>

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12 Key Lessons

When tutoring others in communication, include these 12 points in your lessons. Offer them in chunks and then get people to practice the concepts so they'll embed them in their brains. In my experience, these principles, which are generally obvious to communicators, often tend to trip up others:

1. Communication will happen even if you don't communicate actively yourself. Everything you say and do communicates every moment of the day – and night. So you need to tell your story before others create one for you.
2. Communication is everyone's responsibility. It isn't owned by a function or a person.
3. Determine your intent before you speak or write, or present. Recognize that you often need to do something other than inform. For example, while communication is informing, it's also inquiring, instructing, involving, influencing, inspiring, interpreting, interacting, and initiating. (See the box "Being clear about the aim of the communication – the 9 'I's" in the article "How to help your leaders be credible in incredible times", by Liz Guthridge and Tony Simons, on Melcrom's Internal Comms Hub: www.internalcommshub.com)
4. Put yourself in other peoples' shoes before you communicate. Seeing things from their point of view will help you determine what they want to know about and how they want to get the messages. (See the box "What? So What? Now What? Simple communication planning tool" on page 212.)
5. Like a good conversation, effective communication is two-way. You can't talk at people if you are trying to build understanding, gain acceptance, and encourage them to change their behavior.
6. Communication is an ongoing measurable process, just as other business processes; communication is not a campaign, product, or event.
7. You can influence communication, especially when you shape and manage the communication processes, but you cannot control the messages.
8. More communication is not better communication. Be respectful of information overload. Be succinct.
9. Be personal and appeal to people's hearts, not just heads. This helps you cut through the clutter to get and hold people's attention. You'll also help them recall your message if you use memorable, visual phrases. For example, instead of saying "We want to be profitable by 2013," appeal to "Be in the green by 2013."
10. Informal interactions, especially face-to-face, are more influential than formal communication so make time to get around and talk with people.
11. Formal communication, which helps reinforce the informal interactions, takes time to consider, plan, and execute, especially if you're coordinating among a team of people who will be sending messages. If you wait to think about the communication when you're ready to implement a change or introduce a new program, it's too late.
12. Effective communication cannot guarantee successful results; however, the absence of effective communication or poor execution can contribute to failure.

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What? So What? Now What?: Simple communication planning tool

How do you get non-communicators planning their communication in a systematic way? Encourage them to ask these three questions:

1. What?
2. So what?
3. Now what?

The answers will help them swiftly move to the core of the matter and save time for themselves and the individuals whose behavior needs to change.

Case Study

Here's an example of how these questions work, based on a recent project for a global high-tech company. We used my LEAN COMMUNICATIONS® 3-Step Communications Planning Tool, designed primarily for non-communicators to use quickly and effectively.

What? The burning issue for a global travel department was to improve compliance with its travel and expense policy. The internal audit team, which had recently reviewed expense reports, not only shared the travel group's passion, but was also pushing the group to take action. Both groups were concerned that if they did nothing, their fast-growing employer risked not only higher costs, but also reputational hazards. For instance, if the situation got out of control, executives would have a lot of explaining to do to the board of directors and stakeholders, as well as to the public.

So what? Yet, ambivalence on this topic reigned everywhere else in the company. And not surprisingly. The travel group's data showed that the vast majority of employees were adhering to the policy and filing accurate claims. The Executive Committee members needed to care though, especially since their reputation was on the line if the few bad apples started rotting and bringing others down with them.

Now what? Based on the situation, we realized that we needed to target just a subset of the entire stakeholder group and provide them with a call to action.

We focused on the leaders, especially those with employees who were ignoring aspects of the travel and expense policy, as the key stakeholders for the communication. We set up conversations with them to explain the importance of being good corporate citizens, especially around company expenses. Since they as well as their employees are proud to be affiliated with the company, this message resonated well. We also provided the leaders with messages and tools that they could use as is or tailor with their employees, recognizing that employees would listen more to their leaders than to the global travel department.

We also trained the customer service team to reach out to employees who might be misunderstanding or not following the policy to help them do the right thing, again stressing the importance of being good corporate citizens. We wanted to avoid playing "gotcha" so employees wouldn't think we were setting them up to fail and foot the bill for extra expenses. As for everyone else, we were transparent but we didn't delve into details with the project. It was just TMI – too much information.

The learnings and the results. Initially, the project team members had wanted to broadcast all the fine points about their project to everyone. However, after asking the three questions, they saw the value in engaging only with those who needed to change their ways.

As a result, they increased compliance without any backlash or disruption. And they learned that by sparing the air and being clear, they could be credible and get the actions they wanted.