

# Leading and learning by example

Bayer HealthCare's Sreejit Mohan explains how his team took on a more strategic leadership communication role



**Sreejit Mohan:** "Having a clear purpose helps us as a team. It's our north star, guiding us in deciding what we do and don't do, and giving us more clarity around how we execute."

**T**o Sreejit Mohan, director of public policy and communication for Bayer HealthCare's West Coast operations, the "how" is as important as the "what" in his communication team's activities. His team of six full-time employees has broad responsibilities for internal and external communication to 2,000 employees in the San Francisco Bay Area and Seattle, as well as community relations for all of Bayer HealthCare's West Coast biotechnology operations.

In the past five years, the team has evolved from a tactical support provider into a strategic management function. What they do and how they do it is now very different. And more important, from leaders' perspectives, the team is providing much more valuable work.

Mohan is quick to say the communication function is still a work in progress. However, is anything ever finished

these days? We all need to be in beta, making continual improvements.

In the following interview, longtime IABC member Liz Guthridge, the managing partner of Connect Consulting Group, a change communication consultancy based in Kensington, California, and the originator of Lean Communications, which applies traditional lean manufacturing and management principles and practices to communication, spoke with Mohan about how his group's practices have changed; the two have worked together for the past four years.

**Liz Guthridge: What was the trigger that caused you to rethink how your communication team worked?**

**Sreejit Mohan:** We did an acquisition in which our leaders relied heavily on the communication team for change communication support. We did great and delivered an award-winning

program. Yet I realized that if we continued supporting change initiatives, we would need to change our mode of operation, and retool ourselves from a process and skills perspective. We didn't have enough horsepower.

**LG: In 2009, the company accelerated the pace of change, which led to some substantial changes in how you did business. What increased your urgency about making changes?**

**SM:** Three things were happening in parallel. First, the business was continuing to experience changes. We were bringing on new leaders, changing our organizational structure and introducing new initiatives. Second, and consequently, leaders were requesting more strategic counsel and support. Third, I participated in a leadership development program with other West Coast leaders, which gave me greater insights and understanding about how I needed to act as a leader of my

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team, and also how to address the needs of the other leaders in the organization. For example, I realized I should build greater trust with my team and empower them more, build stronger relationships with peers, give and receive more feedback, and work on becoming extremely self-aware so that I can make improvements. The other benefit to this leadership development program was that all of us on the leadership team started to use common language and tools around leadership.

**LG: Can you talk about applying lean principles to your communication function?**

**SM:** I was already familiar with lean concepts because of my engineering and management background, and also from supporting a manufacturing organization. Lean talks about the importance of the three “P”s: purpose, process and people. The three “P”s helped guide us in adapting our function.

For about a year, we operated without a well-articulated purpose statement. At a team meeting, we created this purpose statement: “To deliver to our customers high-quality communication services and products that provide outstanding results.”

That worked well for about 18 months. However, as leaders started requesting more strategic support and we started seeing the greater value we could and should add, we realized we should revisit our purpose statement. At your suggestion, we simultaneously studied our stakeholders. The examination not only helped us craft a more cogent purpose statement, but also made us more conscientious about our actions so we were in better alignment with the business.

Our purpose now is this: “We provide strategic communication support to leaders and engage stakeholders to achieve business goals.” Having a clear purpose helps us as a team. It’s our north star, guiding us in deciding what we do and don’t do, and giving us more clarity around how we execute.

**LG: Let’s talk about the second “P”—process—the standardized way you work to get predictable and consistent outcomes. Can you tell us about the process you used to review your processes?**

**SM:** We needed to make sure our processes were helping us deliver on our purpose. We also needed to get rid of waste—basically everything that didn’t add any value to our customers, the leaders who pay for our function. We decided to focus on five major value streams—that is, the sequence of activities required to design, produce and provide a specific service to our customers. For each value stream, we asked ourselves: Who are we serving? What’s the value we’re adding? What are the actions involved from start to finish? Where are the improvement opportunities? For example, what can we do more of? What can we do better? What should we start doing?

From the team’s perspective, one of the more crucial questions was “What can we stop doing?” We knew we couldn’t add resources, so we were going to have to work smarter.

After spending time on this, we realized we should be consolidating some channels. We

didn’t need to publish as many newsletters. We also realized we were providing too much writing and editorial support for other departments to maintain their intranet pages. If we got them more involved in the process, we’d be leveraging our services much more effectively.

**LG: Let’s now talk about the third “P,” which in your case was about getting your people focused on leadership communication.**

**SM:** Leaders play a critical role in communication during times of change. Initially, we concentrated on active communication coaching and counseling, strategic and tactical support on major changes and projects, and town hall meeting support for functional leaders who hold meetings for their staffs. After we conducted three or four town halls with our new template approach, our top leader at the Berkeley [California] site commended us on how streamlined and painless the process had become.

We’ve been collecting feedback after every town hall meeting, and as much as possible, we incorporate the feedback [into future events]. We received a number of requests for an in-depth view into a couple of topics as well as updates. So we’ve started having fewer topics and adding more discussion time.

**LG: What are some of the outcomes you’ve experienced with your leadership communication?**

**SM:** Leaders are engaging employees in more dialogue, which is increasing business awareness and understanding among employees. We’ve also

## Nine tips for becoming a trusted coach

We created a playbook that outlines ways to help communication professionals develop into true coaches and advisers to corporate leaders. Here are our tips:

**1 Start from a position of strength.** Have your employee communication function be part of corporate communication, rather than HR, marketing or another department. If that's not feasible, stay closely linked with external communications to ensure all messages are consistent and aligned with company strategy.

**2 Increase your business acumen.** Think and act more like a businessperson than a communicator. This means knowing the business and your industry. For example, be able to explain how the company makes money and where it spends it; who your biggest customers are and their concerns; who your competitors are and how you differ from them; trends influencing your business; metrics you track and why; and other relevant information. Regularly skim trade publications, analysts' reports and influential bloggers for your industry. As a result, you can provide more targeted communication advice within the context of the business.

**3 Adopt the mind-set of a coach/teacher/leader.** Recognize that your role is to empower and support leaders to communicate, not to do the work for them. You should consider yourself more of a curator of conver-

sations among leaders, employees and other stakeholders, rather than a writer, editor or communication technician. Always be on the lookout for opportunities to model the behavior you want leaders to emulate. And find moments to teach leaders the power of effective communication. Don't wait to be asked—jump in and offer support when you see a need. Even better, anticipate needs.

**4 Get rid of work that doesn't add value** and other waste in your communication processes. Take time to look for extra, time-intensive steps you're doing that no longer add value, and eliminate them. For example, consider repurposing content, combining publications and leveraging co-workers outside of communication to provide content for the intranet. These actions can free up valuable time and resources that you can redeploy to coaching leaders.

**5 Track your impact, not your time.** Check to make sure you're always adding value, including helping leaders make an impact. Don't get hung up on the amount of time you spend with them or whether you're at the table. Leaders value big impact with minimal time investment.

**6 Be disciplined.** Use the checklists, tools and templates to save time and keep your processes as simple as possible. Tweak them if they need adjusting, but don't abandon them. Being methodical about how you work will

help you get consistent, predictable outcomes, as well as save time.

**7 Work on two levels**—the leadership team and the individual leaders. Encourage leaders to stay out of the ICU—that is, the "individual contributor unit." Work with them to make sure their communications don't contradict with the overall company messages or their team members'. Besides sending consistent messages, the individual leaders should show in words and actions that they're all playing on the same team.

**8 Play to each leader's strengths.** Spend time observing and listening to each of the leaders you're supporting to assess their communication comfort zone, including their individual voice. For example, do they prefer meeting with small groups, walking the halls or factory floors, writing emails, talking on the phone, etc.? Do they like to inject humor? Are they ultra-serious? Double check with their team members and others they regularly meet with. Then make sure their individual communication action plan captures their personality as well as plays to their strengths.

**9 Remember the relationships.** Business is all about relationships, which is especially true when you're working closely with leaders. Along with your skills and business acumen, you need to be personable as well as easy to work with to gain trust.

—L.G. & S.M.

strengthened the leaders' communication skills. We're now at a stage where the leaders are actively involved in the design of the communication plans; we're co-creating these plans. This part of our transformation is still very much in its infancy, and we have more work to do.

**LG: In the interest of continual improvement, which is so central to lean, what are some of**

**the other areas that you plan to tackle?**

**SM:** That's a loaded question. Peter Drucker wrote that "communication in an organization...is not a means of an organization. It is the mode of organization." If you look at it from this perspective, there are so many areas to improve. To make communication truly effective, you have to influence several other interlinked aspects

of an organization's culture that don't fall under communications. This includes formal functions like training, leadership development, performance management and knowledge management, and informal aspects such as meetings, informal coalitions, employee networks, etc. We are taking baby steps to influence these areas, but it's going to take time for us to have real impact. •