

PRNews

THE BOOK OF
EMPLOYEE
COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGIES & TACTICS

How to Improve Your ‘Organizational Clarity’ Grade by Being Brain-Friendly

By Liz Guthridge

Want to improve “Organizational Clarity” and ultimately your business performance and bottom line? Make sure employees see and act upon a clear line of sight between their job and the marketplace they operate in against the backdrop of the company’s strategy.

This alignment—both inside and outside the organization—is the key concept of *Organizational Clarity: The Case for Workforce Alignment & Belief* [bit.ly/1TSHPra], a two-year study from the **Institute for Public Relations**.

While Organizational Clarity is a new name, its purpose is familiar and comprehensive: helping drive business success as defined by financial performance, retention, recruitment innovation, learning and productivity.

Cramming information into the brain works if the goal is to pass a test. However, if want people to remember and apply new content— which is key for Organizational Clarity—the brain needs to rest regularly between taking in and storing new content.

The roots of Organizational Clarity are based on a broad range of disciplines. The report and the accompanying infographic,

10 Ways to Improve Organizational Clarity and Drive Performance, are silent on neuroscience. Yet if you integrate brain-friendly actions into your other actions for employees, you’ll make it easier for the brain to respond and react. It’s the difference between coasting on a bicycle downhill versus pushing an 18-wheeler uphill.

Use These Brain-Friendly Actions to Help You Improve Organizational Clarity

To help employees achieve a clearer line of sight without overtaxing the brain, you can:

1. **Adopt brain-friendly communication basics.** These basics help employees pay attention, stay focused and remember.
2. **Include a social element.** When employees get involved with leaders and their peers around Organizational Clarity, they will increase their emotional connection to each other as well as to their job and the brand. These connections aid in spurring action and improving recall.
3. **Recognize efforts as well as results.** Recognition provides a “feel good” dopamine hit, which encourages employees to repeat the behavior and quicken the rewiring of the brain.

Brain-Friendly Communication Basics

Of all the brain-friendly actions you can take to help grab employees’ attention, these three are most suited to increasing organiza-

tional Clarity.

- **Name it.** The name of a concept serves a similar function to a person's name. It's a quick identifier. This reduces the cognitive energy employees have to spend trying to remember what you're talking about or why it's important. The name can either be descriptive, such as an "Acquire to Invest" growth strategy, an acronym that's meaningful to the organization or whatever other moniker you choose. For example, **Salesforce.com** created "V2MOM" (vision, values, methods, obstacles and measures) shortly after its founding to help keep employees aligned to its business strategy and plans. More than 15 years later, V2MOM is a cultural icon for the firm [sforce.co/1Gaa8KX].
- **Chunk the content.** When you provide information in bite-size pieces, you figuratively help people digest what they hear, see and read. When you also space the content out over time, employees can literally sleep on it and therefore remember it better. Cramming information into the brain works if the goal is to pass a test. However, if you want people to remember and apply new content—which is key for Organizational Clarity—the brain needs to rest regularly between taking in and storing new content. Research has shown that sleep is necessary for the brain to store and recall memories. While you sleep, the hippocampus region sifts through what you learned and experienced during the day and plays back memories, preparing the most meaningful ones for long-term memory and recall.
- **Start with "why."** When you focus on the big picture—as in the purpose of your business strategy—you talk more abstractly than concretely, which appeals to

the brain's motivational system. Ideally, this purpose should appeal to something big, such as the greater good, to inspire employees. That's because when employees can relate the organization's purpose to their individual beliefs and value systems, they have a greater emotional connection and self-interest. The tighter linkages they feel also can spur them to action. For example, **Mallinckrodt Pharmaceuticals'** "Managing complexity to improve people's lives" [bit.ly/2cOsTK4] can inspire employees to act accordingly. Many of Mallinckrodt's employees are highly educated and well trained, and deal with hazardous chemicals, comply with detailed laws and regulations, and make and sell pharmaceutical and biotech products and services around the globe. The point is not to embrace complexity for complexity's sake, but to figure out ways to harness that complexity and work through it to ensure that they're providing products and services to hospitals and doctors that will prescribe them to help people improve their health. Staff functions, including procurement, finance, legal, HR and others also adopt this mantra, managing the complexity of their function to enable fellow employees to get things done without being overwhelmed with minutia that they don't care about.

The Social Element

When you gather people to talk about the business and their jobs, you help them strengthen their connections to each other as well as to the content. These interactions help employees gain valuable insights, build stronger memories and commit to taking specific actions.

For this social element to succeed, you don't have to throw a big bash. The get-to-

3 Tips to Make Your Messaging More Brain-Friendly

To improve the influence of your messaging, try these three brain-friendly tips:

- 1. Be positive with your names as well as your language.** Describe what something is, not what it isn't. Avoid phrases like "no more software" and "no more cold calling." Instead, flip it around to the more optimistic "work in the clouds" and "corral a pal and think of a link." When your language is upbeat and positive, you'll put people into a more positive state of mind. They'll be more open to considering your message. By contrast, if individuals perceive messages to be negative, they can become fearful and shut down.
- 2. Include calls to action.** When you're chunking your content, leave room for a call to action. Messages without action can be clutter. Tell people—or at least suggest—what they can do next to advance the cause. To help people follow through, make the request visible, concrete and simple, providing a clear sequence of small steps. For example, if you want to gather feedback through an online survey, make sure to highlight the survey URL so it's easy to click, and provide an estimate of how long it will take them to complete (ideally fewer than five minutes) and what they can expect for their effort.
- 3. Add the "how" shortly after the "why" to keep individuals engaged and motivated.** The brain has two different systems for processing the motivational (the "why") and the executional (the "how"). These networks work at different times. Individuals show a preference for using one network over the other, often related to their job. For example, visionary executives enjoy talking at the 50,000-foot level. By contrast engineers and others in the trenches often are eager to know the specifics about execution. By addressing the "how" soon after you explain the "why," you are able to link the purpose to the process and keep both networks and types of people engaged.

Note that many more brain-friendly tips exist. Three is a magic and manageable number, however. Longer tip sheets, especially with more than 10 items, can overtax the brain and cause eyes to glaze over—especially as a sidebar to a sizable article. Better to be succinct and specific than loquacious to get attention and be memorable and actionable.

If you're interested in more brain-friendly communication tips, please see 10 tips for sound bites with substance [bit.ly/2d6Uvee].

gethers can be informal as long as the environment feels non-threatening and conducive to candid conversations.

The leaders who sponsor or host the interactions also need to move away from "telling and selling" and strive for "involving and inquiring."

In fact, asking questions, especially thinking questions, plays an important role. Thinking questions are designed to help individuals stop, reflect and focus on their thinking.

When a person experiences an "aha" moment while talking or hearing others express their points of view, the person's brain literally changes. It forms new connections and changes in the way that individual thinks

about and acts on a topic.

With these get-togethers, leaders also can encourage employees to help each other stretch. When employees gather, especially in diverse groups across functional and operational silos, to talk about the business, they can motivate each other, as well as share tips and tools and troubleshoot. This positive peer pressure can increase collaboration, improve productivity and strengthen relationships.

Salesforce.com leaders also encourage employees to share their goals with each other through **Chatter**. This degree of transparency helps employees be more open and straightforward with each other. When employees team up for the first time, they already speak

a common language through their V2MOM and know what they want to achieve. They just need to figure out the best way to work with each other, and they're ready to collaborate.

Recognition

One of the best low-cost, high-value actions is thanking employees for making an effort toward achieving Organizational Clarity. Yet popular practice among many leaders is to withhold recognition until they see results.

Reinforcement theory, confirmed by neuroimaging, shows otherwise. When you acknowledge people for taking positive steps, verbal praise increases the likelihood that people will repeat the behavior.

From a neuroscience perspective, the prize activates the neurotransmitter dopamine, which helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centers and regulates movement and emotional responses.

As a result, when individuals experience

a reward, they're motivated to repeat the actions to get more rewards, even if it's just another hit of dopamine. This combination embeds the action in the brain faster, which helps change behavior.

Expressing thanks has an additional benefit: Others notice the recognition and become interested in sharing the gratitude. The good behavior will start to spread, showing the power of positive, contagious behavior.

Bolster, Don't Burden, the Brain

These brain-friendly actions, especially the emotionally laden social elements, play to people's interests and how the brain is wired. By incorporating these actions, you can make it easier for employees to see and focus on their line of sight, which will improve your Organizational Clarity grade. ■

Liz Guthridge is managing director of Connect Consulting Group. liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com.