



Getting personal

Communications departments are often asked for an internal communications plan or strategy for the organisation. My question is, why?

What makes internal communications anything special? As if it had nothing to do with external, multicultural, corporate or any other communications?

I'd have thought a rigorous corporate communications strategy would include internal communications, not make it some special entity. Internal communications is a sub-heading of reality, not a reality in itself.

Strategies developed for isolated purposes may deliver excellent processes or a great campaign with a bunch of creatives and taglines, but there's no guarantee of lasting positive change.

Fit for purpose

A strategy's purpose is to achieve the outcomes it intends. So what is the purpose of internal communications?

An obvious one is to manage how information circulates in the organisation, to make sure everyone knows what they need to know, or can find out.

There are two ways to do this – via systems such as intranets,

bulletins and collaboration portals; and face-to-face in meetings, forums and corridors.

Internal communications documents will favour one or the other. If developed by the communications department alone, face-to-face communication may be treated as something to schedule not nurture.

And here the purpose forks.

Dichotomy

As a Council communicator, I have worked on a few internal communications plans. However, attempts to include the interpersonal factor to complement systemic solutions like the e-news or scripting CEO forums, met responses like 'not needed', 'too complicated' or 'we have that covered'.

It became apparent that to many, psychology and personal opinion had nothing to do with internal communications. Or if so, it wasn't in my remit as a communications specialist. Hmm.

So what do you call an internal communications strategy that does include the interpersonal?

Measurement

Performance indicators for communication are difficult to pin down. So difficult in fact, that they are often easily gained measures of output such as announcements per week, or of responses such as website hits.

They're useful metrics for operations management, but hardly an indication of whether a communication has had the intended effect. Where a communication goes and what it does is like mist and difficult to track.

No outcome can be entirely attributed to the communications surrounding it. Nor can we control a communication once it is out there, whether in the workplace or the external community.

In principle, you can't know the effectiveness of a communications regime without delving into the mind of the receiver. Did it change attitudes, knowledge, relationships, regard or understanding? Or was it simply parked in the brain until forgotten?

Resources prevent us from going the full psychometric hog, so we make do with infrequent staff satisfaction surveys and occasional questionnaires, which of course don't tell you the why behind the results.

Cultural outcomes

It's easy to measure whether staff have access to the information and knowledge to carry out their business.

But what about workplace culture? A subtle concept, and a part time one at that. Workplace culture exists mainly during business hours.

Although Communications Departments are the ones often asked for an internal communications



construct, they are not generally regarded drivers of culture. By and large, that is in the OD's (organisation development) domain.

So, the internal communications strategies of most importance are not called that, and are more likely found in OD strategies.

The bubble

There are parameters which could be used to measure the state of the workplace nation besides how much traction internal employer brands, taglines, mission statements, lists of values, codes of conduct and the like get.

For instance, if the purpose of Local Governments is stewardship on behalf of the community, then internal communications should seek to enlighten staff about that community in preference to organisational philosophies spun to suit a management perspective.

You might even try to find the links between community and staff satisfaction.

The important questions

If you could measure trends in trust and respect between employees and those they work with, or for, you'd have a meaningful indicator of how well internal communications is going.

The 'communications platform' to engender trust of this sort is face-to-face – interaction, collaboration, conversation, even performance appraisals. No vicarious communication will do the trick.

This suggests then another parameter. If you asked a staffer to describe how he or she contributes to the wellbeing and sustainability of the community, you'd expect them to give a reasonable answer from within their professional realm.

On the other hand, if staffers were able to answer that question about what their colleagues do – those from different departments and of different professions – you'd be onto something.

Getting together

The most effective internal communications I've experienced are those that cause people to get to know each other inter-departmentally and inter-professionally.

Those that stick in my mind are "a day in my shoes" job swaps; internal expos (show and tell); days in lieu for working on community activities (e.g. events); and models like the Local Government Management Challenge that are designed to bring unlikely collaborators together.

As community development and engagement folk may tell you, put people in the right settings, and they will achieve great communications and cultural outcomes on their own, possibly better than you can do for them.

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