

### Communication strategy development – some whys and wherefores

Our approach to communication is based on the concept that communications is more than an enabler or a ‘sticking plaster’ for when things get rough; rather it is the process or mechanism that drives an organisation towards its goals and shapes the way an organisation goes about its business. It provides consistency, shared goals, shared understanding and drives the culture of an organisation.

This approach demands that communication is a strategic and managed process – proactive not reactive. A strategy should be developed for the business as whole, supporting the organisation’s core vision and values, and for major projects or when organisations are managing and implementing a change process.

To develop a strategy the management team needs to ask itself:

- Why are we communicating?
- What do we want to say?
- How should we tell the story?
- Who needs to know?
- Who will be delivering the message?
- What resources do we need?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- How will we know when we have been successful?

The answers to these questions can be grouped under the structure of the communications strategy, namely:

- Vision and values
- Objectives
- Standards and style
- Audience
- Message planning and development
- Delivery
- Resourcing
- Measurement

#### **Vision and values**

Organisational vision defines what the company wants to be – what business it wants to conduct and the manner in which it wants to conduct that business. It is aspirational and should be regularly refreshed. The vision is closely linked with, and defines, the brand, organisational values and culture. Questions to ask should include:

- Is there an articulated vision?
- How has this vision been shared with employees?
- What values are associated with the vision? Hence, what behaviours does the organisation seek, endorse and reward?
- How are those behaviours rolled out and measured?

### Objectives

Basically, what it is you are trying to achieve by communicating. The communication objectives should consider and support the key elements of the business strategy and the vision and values. Objectives should also include what people are supposed to do as a result of being communicated to.

Objectives should be set for both the business and people and need to be measurable. Business objectives might include for example, staff turnover goes down; people objectives could include everyone understanding the role they have to play in a change programme. You need to establish:

- What are the objectives of the communication? How will they be developed and who needs to be involved? Will they be written down?
- How does communication currently support and drive the business strategy?
- What do you want the audience to think, feel and do as a result of the communication?
- How will you know if and when you achieve your objectives? What measurement tools do you have?

### Standards and style

Standards and style can support or undermine what you are trying to communicate. They can include 'involving', 'consulting', 'fun', 'open', 'honest', or 'you do as I say!' They define what the communication needs to 'feel' like to achieve the objectives. Essentially it is about 'walking the walk' via communication.

So if your standard is that you want to be involving, the style of communication should include some form of involvement e.g. staff should be given the chance to ask questions about the new process and have the opportunity to develop the process further. If the business is reviewing costs, the communication should not look flamboyant or expensive! If you want innovation, then you should be looking at innovative styles of delivery.

- What standards and style currently exist? Are these consistent across the organisation? If not, why not?
- What new standards and styles need to be developed?
- How will you ensure standards and style are maintained and adhered to?

### Audience

Are there different audiences e.g. management and shop floor, different parts of the organisation, etc or is there just one audience as everyone works for the business? If there are different audiences, are there different messages e.g. do we want to tell staff in one part of the business something different as these groups will be affected differently or you need them to react differently?

You need to decide what the needs of the audience are and what effect you want to have with your communication.

If your workforce is culturally diverse you should consider whether you need to adapt your message and style to accommodate for this.

- How can you segment your audience?
- Do you know the different information needs of these segments?
- What is the best way of reaching these segments (whilst achieving your objectives and maintaining your standards and style)?

### **Message planning and development**

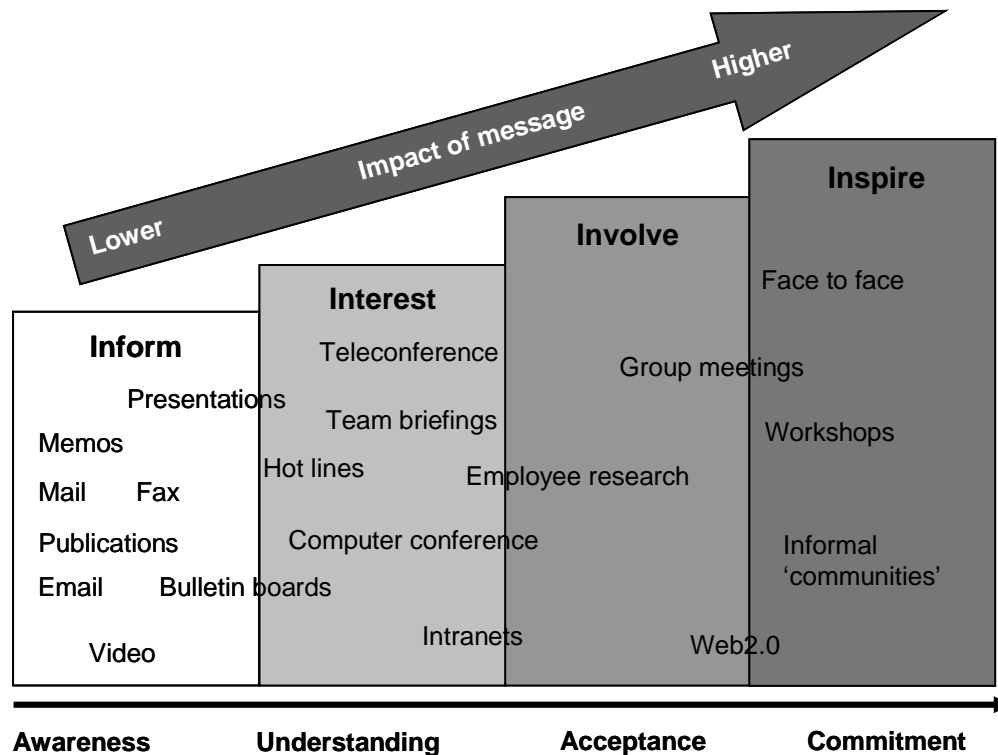
Planning considers how messages are generated, developed and signed-off. It makes the link between the business cycle and the communication cycle explicit. It also ensures that there is a strong link between internal and external communications. The output of this phase is a timetable or routemap showing what is to be communicated, when this communication is to happen and who will receive it, together with who is responsible for message generation and sign off.

- How are messages currently generated? Is this the best method for what you need to achieve?
- How will you allow for ad hoc as well as on-going communications?
- Who currently has sign-off? Who actually needs sign-off, and who is most appropriate?
- How will you make links with the business cycle? And with external communication?
- Who will manage the plan? Can parts of the plan be delegated?

### **Delivery**

This looks at what media should be used to deliver the communication. The ability to select the correct media is key – it takes into account the effect you wish to achieve (from keeping people informed to empowering them to take decisions). You need to look at what media already exists and what might need to be created, and whether communication is routine or non-routine.

The diagram below can be useful for thinking about how to manage delivery through a variety of media, depending on what effect we want:



Certain media are appropriate if you want to inform people and make them aware of an issue – it is unlikely that you will want them to take any action. As the message becomes more important, and you need people to commit, the media you should use become 'richer'. It is important to note that you cannot immediately expect commitment! People need to be taken through a process of awareness raising, gaining understanding and accepting before they will commit.

You need to decide what media are appropriate to deliver the message to the correct audience in a timely manner and in keeping with the standards and objectives, and how this process is managed. In particular, you may need to consider how you will deliver the communication to remote staff, part-time staff etc.

- Who needs to know what?
- What effect do you want? Which media are best placed to achieve this?
- How are the various channels currently being used? Should this be reviewed?
- Do you have all the channels you need? What channels do you need to develop?

Delivery isn't the preserve of the leadership – line managers and other members of staff as appropriate will all have a role to play so you need to decide what you want different people to do in delivering communication.

Of particular importance are line managers. These are often the people charged with delivering communication. In order to do so effectively they must have the appropriate skills and understand the impact both the message and their delivery can have.

- Are managers skilled communicators?
- Do they understand the media mix and when to use the various media at their disposal?
- Is communication part of the appraisal system?
- Is everyone clear about the role they play in the communication process?
- How will you ensure managers adhere to the appropriate style and standards?

### **Resourcing**

This involves putting names against the actions in order to implement the strategy – in other words – who does what?!

- Who else needs to be involved?
- Do you have the necessary resources in house?

### **Measurement**

Progress against the objectives needs to be measured. There is a distinction between measurement – have you actually achieved what you wanted to achieve – and feedback, which is gathering views on content. Measurement can be through, for instance, research, observation, changing behaviour, achievement of financial targets, etc. The results of the measurement phase feed back into the strategic context and planning cycles.

- Have you achieved your objectives? How do you know?
- Have you maintained your standards? How do you know?
- How does measurement feed back into the communication cycle?