

Engaging Employees in Achieving Corporate Goals



Best Practices for Communicating a New Corporate Vision

BY JENNIFER SCHADE

Organizations often devote extensive resources to developing a vision and strategic goals, then do little to ensure that employees understand these objectives. Our research using employee focus groups and surveys has found that employees are able to parrot the company vision but frequently don't know how to apply it. Some tell us confidentially that they doubt the vision is attainable.

In the current climate of acquisition, restructuring and globalization, companies are increasingly required to communicate with employees from diverse cultures, locations and job levels. Finding effective ways to connect all employees to the corporate business strategy is more critical — and challenging — than ever before.

While conducting communications audits and developing strategic internal communications processes for several *Fortune* 500 organizations, we found three best practices were invaluable. These practices can easily be adapted by any organization seeking to increase knowledge and engagement among employees, whether it is creating or improving its internal communications process.

Define success clearly

A communications audit typically involves qualitative or quantitative surveys, but the process or results of the audit may vary considerably, depending on the final goals. The return from a communications audit can be significantly improved by clearly determining how the findings will be used.

The ultimate goal is to improve business results (increased engagement, better utilization of resources), not just determine the effectiveness of communications vehicles.

The audit should lead to actionable information as opposed to a research report. In fact, with a few organizations that we audited, a separate research report would have been cumbersome, so the program moved right from the audit to the development of a comprehensive communications plan that included excerpts from our findings.

This doesn't mean scrapping reports entirely. Clients

may want a report that they can share with executive management when gauging progress on an existing communication plan. For a company that wanted to create a communications function for a regional office, the definition of success was having the function running by the end of our assignment. The deliverable included creating a communications plan and job description, interviewing potential candidates and hiring a communications manager. You need to ensure your outcome meets your needs, rather than conforming to a standard approach.

Sample measures of success for an audit and resulting communications plan for a new corporate vision include:

- Identifying existing business unit resources that can be incorporated into a corporate communications road map.
- Increasing cooperation and alignment between corporate and business unit communications.
- Developing efficient information dissemination channels between corporate headquarters and company locations.
- Unifying recently acquired business units and regions through one overall corporate culture.
- Engaging employees following a restructuring.
- Getting employees worldwide to understand how the organization's vision, mission and values are associated with their own roles within the organization.

After agreeing on the measures of success, work backward to identify specific audit objectives and methodology. Resulting communications plans must include specific metrics that enable ongoing measurement of progress.

Identify how to emotionally connect with employees

One organization, which had just completed restructuring, used the communications audit to determine how to ignite employee passion for a new vision.

This company recognized that effective employee communication increases employee engagement through developing emotional relationships and loyalty. Loyal employees are more likely to support the organization's goals and help the

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company stay competitive. In the end, this relationship can help retain or gain market share.

Our research revealed that employees were proud of the unique heritage of their corporate brand. This pride motivated employees, even though the business environment had become extremely challenging. This pride was incredibly valuable to our client and virtually impossible for competitors to duplicate. The brand held a prestige that employees associated only with their company, and they wanted to help the brand regain its stature. Our client decided to appeal to the employees' pride in the organization to gain support for the company's new vision.

Another client was technologically ahead of many other organizations because of its well-developed corporate intranet site. Employees were accustomed to checking the site for news and corporate announcements. While the intranet site and e-mail system were effective for getting news to employees, their ability to obtain employee feedback or convey executive management's personality and enthusiasm about the company's new vision was limited.

As a result, employees reported that they were eager to adopt the restructured company's identity and culture, but the company's internal electronic communications felt sterile.

Employees perceived the audit interviews as a step toward increased two-way communications and liked the opportunity to provide input into the development of a communications process. Audit findings identified the need for more opportunities for executive management to convey its viewpoint and more feedback mechanisms for employees. Communications were personalized and changed to engage employees emotionally, enabling them to feel like contributors to growth. In addition, the audit clearly indicated that the timing was ideal for the announcement of a corporatwide vision and accompanying strategic goals.

Harness the strength of your existing resources

Creating or revising a communications process doesn't necessarily mean abandoning existing processes.

All organizations have communications systems, both formal and informal. Formal protocols include the organization's internal media, such as employee newsletters or the company intranet. Informal processes involve all employees who spread information.

A communications audit is an opportunity to identify those formal and informal processes in an organization and harness their capabilities in a communications plan.

At one organization, decentralization had made business

units largely responsible for their own communications. The company was now in the process of centralizing communications and creating a communications team at its world headquarters. Our audit identified communications practices of individual business units that the corporation could adopt.

We discovered that most business units used internal consultants as liaisons with other locations. We interviewed these professionals, along with other employees, who provided feedback on existing communications and information needs. We covered all business units, geographic regions, site locations and functional areas. Members of the organization's newly centralized communications team assisted our consultants and utilized the discussions to establish contacts.

Our interviews identified communications tools ranging from site meetings to newsletters. These tools have been supplemented with others to create an organized information network connecting world headquarters to all regional locations across the globe. Existing tools have been revised to convey more leadership messages as well as the vision and strategic goals of each business unit. The network of internal consultants, along with the organization's local leadership, has become part of a worldwide communications infrastructure to help disseminate corporate news.

Smart communications generate results

Powerful internal communications means good business. The best way to create strong communications is to obtain input from the people you are trying to reach.

An effective communications audit and research-based plan reduces your margin of error. Even the highest quality, most professionally produced communications and materials will fail if their contents don't reach and aren't meaningful to the intended audience. When your communications and actions are based on your employees' needs and motivations, they will be compelling. Helping employees feel motivated to support the organization's achievement of business goals may be one of the most important and effective ingredients in building market share. ■

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Jennifer Schade is president of JRS Consulting, Inc., a firm that helps organizations build leading brands and attract and motivate employees and customers. Subscribe to the JRS newsletter on www.jrsconsulting.net.