

Memo to Management

What's Your Company's "Communications Standard?"

If you're drawing a blank, you don't have one....now's the time to consider implementing

As a domestic, international, multi-national or global organization, you adhere to a set of standards in virtually every function or activity of the business. Accounting, governance, manufacturing and HR standards are commonplace. Such standards allow the business to operate in a manner that allows key stakeholders to trust the integrity and viability of the operation.

However, there still remains one area that has avoided leadership scrutiny and the appetite of communications executives, robbing managers and employees of the discipline necessary to engage in and be productive members of the organization. For all of the advances being made in our ability to connect, reach, listen, involve and discern each other's perspectives and opinions, and the increasing complexity of globalization, there is still a reticence on the part of leadership to establish a standard or discipline for how the organization and its workforce communicate and engage with each other. The missing piece is a standard upheld by leadership promising certain protocols will be adhered to throughout the year.

So what is a communications standard?

Simply put it's a set of actions that the organization commits itself to on a regular basis for the purpose of sharing knowledge, gaining input, building connections, creating communities and socializing the entity for mutual benefit and gain. It establishes an expectation level among employees about the frequency, content and cadence of communications throughout the enterprise versus a string of disparate activities that do little to inform and involve the workforce.

Given the pace of society and business, it is becoming an essential ingredient to progressive management models.

Done right, communications standards create a "habit" for how people receive, listen, exchange and assimilate information removing barriers, destroying silos while encouraging discussion, dialogue and debate to ensure people are informed, confident, and engaged in the strategy and operations of the enterprise.

Every company's communications standard is or should be designed to reflect its culture, workforce dynamics, leadership approach, and management model. It should be formally stated and frequently reinforced. For those joining the company, the standard should be shared and explained at the outset. For all employees, the resulting standard should feel comfortable and be seen as a natural extension of the organization's culture and belief system.

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A generic version of an actual communications standard appears below:

XYZ Corporation's sustained success is due in large part to the active engagement of all employees at every level in understanding and contributing to the design, development and implementation of various strategies, products, services, and innovation to grow our business.

A critical aspect of engagement is effective communications throughout the enterprise. Effective communications not only drives engagement it also builds trust and confidence contributing to organizational agility and performance clarity.

To that end, leadership and management are committed to an open, transparent workplace to ensure every individual has the capability to be well informed about the business' key dimensions:

- Leadership priorities
- Business strategy
- Competitive challenges
- Market opportunities
- Brand/product
- Financial performance
- Operational performance
- Policies relating to the environment, diversity, safety

The XYZ promise:

Following are specific activities you can expect relating to internal communications:

1. Annual state of the business report
2. CEO and/or senior management bi-weekly message
3. CEO quarterly business performance update
4. Local manager quarterly business performance update
5. Robust, interactive portal housing information on company policies, functions, competitive/industry news, personnel, news releases/announcements, executive speeches, etc
6. CEO and/or local site leader led town hall meetings (minimum of 4 times per year)
7. Annual CSR report on the company's investments, progress
8. Annual employee survey and report out/action plan
9. Work environment promoting open discussion and constructive debate
10. Twenty-four hour response to questions or comments posed to any level of management

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Continuous Loop

Having a well-documented standard or protocol for communications not only sets the parameters by which people can interact and relate to each other and the business, it also solves one of business' most pressing challenges: *effective strategy implementation*.

As any management consultant can attest, the most significant area for improvement in a company's ability to effectively execute against its strategy is communications. It is often the communications – not the strategy itself – that is the reason for failure.

Putting a standard in place allows leaders and managers to follow the pathways established in communicating to the organization. It helps to coordinate and calibrate messaging, follow an established system, and feed the internal channels with relevant information.

Without it, managers are left to fend for themselves as to how they will implement strategy often ignoring the need for continuous communications and missing the opportunities to create interest and engage teams in the process.

The Engagement Imperative

With people having both the interest and the tools to insert their voice in global conversations -offering opinions, ideas, criticisms -on every subject imaginable, having the workplace replicate that reality is expected.

An organization that attempts to navigate its way through the maze of cross-interests pervading its universe is fully participating in solving a host of business and societal issues.

It's also smart. A communications standard is a criterion to measure just how engaged you want your employees to be in the business and just how involved your managers must become in making that happen.

Moving from "Habit" to Lifestyle"

In survey after survey organizational clarity – clearly articulating the direction and performance of the business – remains an important differentiator in one's relationship to his/her company. Instituting a protocol for what, how, and when to provide pertinent information to employees establishes a philosophy for communications that underpins the company's management model. It signals for managers the importance placed on communications encouraging engagement and an open management style conducive to today's plugged-in workforce.

The resulting behavior from leaders, managers and employees at all levels of the organization culminates in a "habit" for maintaining an open, transparent, and interactive environment. Such a habit if maintained translates into a "lifestyle" or an inherent way to work and grow. The better informed, the more confident and capable individuals become.

For organizations looking for a competitive advantage this would seem to be a fairly simple yet powerful technique.

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Memo to Management is a regular commentary published by Edelman Change and Employee Engagement providing insights and advice useful to business and communications executives.

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