

Building Communications Capacity in Leaders and Managers

The way in which leaders communicate with their people can have a significant impact throughout an organisation. Get it right and people will be more inclined to support the organisation, even in difficult times; get it wrong, trust can be lost, morale drops and it's a downward spiral.

At a recent meeting of the Internal Communications Group, run by Charity Comms and sponsored by Agenda Consulting, there was an opportunity for Internal Communications leaders from a wide range of not-for-profit organisations to talk about how to build communications capacity in leaders and managers. So how can Internal Comms play an active role in building leadership and managers' communication skills?

For Internal Comms building trusting relationships with the Chief Executive and other members of the SMT is critical, so that the Internal Comms team has an appreciation of what is on their agenda and help them get the message right. It can take time – personal styles and skills of senior leaders make a big difference to how easy it is to engage them in internal and leadership communications.

The priority given to comms varies widely across organisations and persuading senior leaders of its importance can be difficult – using hard stats/feedback from staff surveys can be a useful way to do this. In recent research carried out by Agenda Consulting, using data from 50 surveys from 50 organisations, covering 9,100 employees in the UK, the key factors influencing staff engagement in the Third Sector were identified.

In 10 key areas, a single question was selected and the responses were analysed to explore the relationship between the 10 factors and the results for the question, "I would wholeheartedly recommend the organisation to others as a Good Place to Work". The research identifies the relative impact of each factor on that question.

Perceptions of Leadership, Values, and Communication strongly influence Good Place to Work (47% together). The questions used in the research to reach these conclusions were:

Leadership:	I trust and respect the leadership group in this organisation
Values:	This organisation has strong values and operates to high ethical standards
Communications:	This organisation practises open, honest communication and shares information

In other words, the leadership group and whether they are trustworthy; the strength of values/ethics in practice, and views on open and honest communication are very important factors for staff. They influence their willingness to recommend the organisation as a good place to work. Therefore investing time in improving the way messages are delivered will benefit an organisation. Demonstrating the impact of effective communication on the bottom line is a powerful way to drive comms up the agenda.

Often, when leaders get close to their people, and put themselves alongside their employees and volunteers, it improves their relationship with their people and builds trust. In one charity, staff survey results showed that staff didn't feel senior managers communicated with them well or understood what they did. As a result they introduced a programme of senior management visits, run by senior managers, and reported through internal comms. Two years on this helped improve positive views of senior management by 18%.

Other examples of bringing leaders closer to their people include breakfast clubs hosted by senior managers with no defined agenda other than to listen to frontline staff's experiences and ideas, road shows, working in the field alongside staff for a day every few months. It is suggested that it is the little things, such as managers mingling with staff informally that make a difference to the perception of leadership.

The culture of an organisation can act against attempts by senior managers to engage more with their people. Sometimes staff and volunteers don't feel they can or want to engage informally or otherwise with senior managers. Strong CEOs can be intimidating and it's important to be aware of this. Where there is a trusting relationship between

Internal Comms and senior management, giving honest feedback on how they might engage people more effectively (and how they might adapt their personal style) is time well spent.

It is worthwhile spending time with those leaders less confident about their comms skills. Some handholding at the start may be good, but be careful not to provide too much or it will reduce the leader's capability/confidence. Leaders should be encouraged to develop their personal style and tone, with solid guidance from comms specialists. A "tone of voice" document can help them to understand its importance and help to avoid the use of "corporate speak" and jargon. However, people will know if messages are scripted – the secret is to draw out the authentic voice of the leader/manager, give support and help them to manage face to face opportunities, and other routes to people in a way which builds confidence and trust both ways.

A good way to preempt a communication being poorly received is to set up a network of champions in different parts of the organisation to test out with them how messages might land before they are issued. Effective communication isn't one-way and shouldn't always be driven from the top - listening is as much a part as delivering the message. Developing a culture of people generated strategy can be powerful. Holding internal comms groups and drop-in sessions with leaders for them to find out how staff and volunteers will take the organisation forward is much more likely to make it happen if they are part of it and see management taking their ideas seriously.

Cascading messages can also be a challenge, so help managers to feel part of the leadership team. Breaking down information into "things for you to know", "reminders for you" and "things you need to make sure your team know", with clear time scales attributed, can help to make their life easier and helps with the consistency of the message.

The Internal Communications Group gave some helpful techniques and tools, including:

- Present a 'menu' of choice of communications routes to each individual leader so that they can select those which suit their personality and they are comfortable with
- Give them honest feedback on their communications and provide media training/coaching to improve skills
- Initiate blogs and CEO internal blog – prepare leaders to respond authentically and appropriately to questions
- Hold breakfast meetings with the CEO – people can apply and be part of it – no agenda
- Encourage monthly staff briefings by the CEO. Explore technology options, such as webinars to include those people located away from the centre
- If appropriate, hold drop-in sessions and surgeries
- Conduct Webex phone-in conversations with CEO (groups of 20-25 work well, better conversations than larger groups)
- Hold Q&A sessions on specific topics (or open) with directors – using adobe connect/telecom/live online discussion – good for efficient and effective engagement through leadership particularly during times of change
- Yammer should be encouraged as it's a great tool for increasing communications
- Encourage leaders to attend existing team meetings
- Include a comms section in management development training
- Create toolkits: how to plan communications, how to use your organisation's channels etc
- Management cascade – send a fortnightly reminder to managers about the main messages they should be aware of, signpost them to the rest of the detail and ask them to share it with their teams
- Put pictures and info on the intranet to connect with the whole organisation

When organisations give priority to effective communications, it is likely that their people will remain more engaged and thus more inclined to stay. If internal comms can persuade the senior team of its positive impact, and work with managers to build confidence and skills, the outcomes will benefit all.

Clare Harris, Head of Business Development, Agenda Consulting
June 2015