



BEST PRACTICES IN HUMAN RESOURCE COMMUNICATION

By: June A. Mara, CEO, XL Communications Inc.

Effective Human Resource communication *can* help you and your organization succeed. But why bother? You're doing okay now, why rock the boat and do something different? The results of a Willis Towers Watson study identify why.

- "Companies with *high effectiveness in change management and communication* are three and a half times more likely to significantly outperform their industry peers than firms that are not effective in these areas.'
- "The most effective companies build a differentiated employee value proposition (EVP), and are three times more likely to focus on behaviors that drive organization success instead of focusing on program cost.'
- "Effective managers are a catalyst for successful change, yet only one in four organizations that train managers say the training is effective."

So if you're satisfied with just okay, there's no need to read any further. If, on the other hand, you strive to do the best you can, read on to learn how best practices in HR communication can improve employee engagement, and how it impacts the ultimate success of your organization.

COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

What do those organizations that communicate most effectively do differently?

The Institute for Public Relations published a study that examined best-in-class employee communications from the perspective of 10 global HR communication leaders. Here's what those organizations identified as significant factors in achieving communications effectiveness.

1. Communications must be **business focused and strategic**. Organizations need a clear direction, should identify specific and measurable objectives and include communications in their strategic planning.

The International Association of Business Communicators Research Foundation, rates *motivating employees to align them with the business strategy* as the single greatest communication challenge organizations face.

2. Providing meaningful **rationale** is an outgrowth of business focused and strategic communications. The real message is the shared purpose and value for the organization and employees, the *what's in it for me*. Communicating the facts is easy. Helping employees understand the why – what it means to them and the organization – is what is often overlooked.
3. As the workplace shifts from baby boomers to Gen X, Gen Y and Millennials, so do **employee preferences and expectations**. Employees want there to be meaning in what they do. Communication needs to support that goal by doing more than just pushing information out – it needs to get employees and groups together and provide opportunities for them to share information and knowledge.
4. Successful organizations have a clear, measurable path to their desired **objectives** and how communication will help them drive a shared purpose. The shared purpose must recognize the differing roles of employees at different skill levels and how they support one another.
5. Communication should be **proactive** and reflect the organization's strategic short term and long term goals. To do that, communication should be woven into the fabric of the decision-making process; and part of the culture of the organization – not an afterthought when the decision making and planning has been completed.
6. Messaging needs to be **authentic**, and demonstrate the integrity of the organization. Tell employees the truth, even if the message is bad news. Don't sugar coat it and don't put a spin on it. Make sure messaging to both your internal and external audiences is consistent.
7. Employees continue to look to their **managers** as a trusted resource for information. Effective organizations provide key leaders and front line managers with the training, tools and information they need to be effective communicators.

The IABC rated *managers as a trusted resource for information* as the second greatest communication challenge organizations face.

8. The most effective communicators recognize the importance of **content and content strategy**. They reinforce key messages in every communication they release. They speak with a common voice regardless of who prepares the communication. Organizations that use generic communication materials miss the boat because they fail to consider how the messaging relates to strategy, rationale, shared values, different stakeholders and authenticity. Employees are bombarded with communications – but each with a different voice, a different message.

9. Many organizations in the survey group **regularly measure** the effectiveness of communications content, media and return on investment against measurable goals. Those that were not focused on proving the value and ROI of strong internal communications believe it is inherently known and understood and witnessed in many ways, even if it can't be quantified. It is generally understood that a more engaged workforce results in higher productivity, more innovation, greater retention, better recruitment and turns employees into company advocates.

Some organizations use a **communications scorecard approach** and assign dollar values to their goals. Figure 1 (below) shows a fairly simple scorecard. You can drill down to more specific communication processes to get more specific information. But even this simple scorecard can provide you with some valuable information and help you adjust how and what you are communicating.

Figure 1 – Sample Communications Scorecard

Goals	Required Outcomes	Measurement Method	Actual Outcome	Rating
Effective Communication Channels	80% of employees to access website	Google Analytics Communication Survey Town Hall Survey		
Effective Messaging	75% of employees understand initiative	10% Increase in Participation Communication Survey Town Hall Survey		
Impact on Behavior	5% increase in customer satisfaction 10% decrease in turnover	Customer Survey Metrics Employment Metrics		
Business Impact	3% increase in sales	Sales Report Metrics		

Rating Scale

1. Did not meet required outcome
2. Marginally met required outcome
3. Met required outcome
4. Exceeded required outcome
5. Far exceeded required outcome

So where do you go from here if your organization is not among those that are the most effective communicators? Implementing best practices may seem like a daunting task. Keep in mind that even the best communicators acknowledge that they continue to face communication challenges and that improving communications effectiveness is an ongoing process – particularly as technology continues to evolve.

My recommendation is if you don't already develop a *communication strategy*, begin with that.

To develop a communication strategy, prioritize what you want to achieve, identify the top two or three and use those as your first set of goals. Determine how you will measure success and set a specific time period for reaching those goals. Then identify corporate objectives and how your key messages are going to support them. Include a *communication action plan* that identifies communication elements, media, timing, audience and the individuals responsible for each element. At the end of the timeframe you've established, you can evaluate how well you did in meeting your goals and make any necessary adjustments going forward.

Effective communication is an ongoing process that takes commitment and perseverance. But it's well worth the effort when you see improvements in morale, engagement and productivity.

About the Author

June Mara is the founder and CEO of XL Communications Inc., a human resource communications consulting firm. XL collaborates with organizations that recognize the value of effective communications to better engage employees and ultimately to attract, retain and grow top talent. Contact Ms. Mara at jmara@xlcommunications.com; check out the firm at www.xlcommunications.com.
