



Communicate or Fail

Communicate or Fail may sound a little extreme. It's not. Organisations and individuals can succeed or fail on the effectiveness of their communications. Communicate or Fail focusses on communications at an organisational level and on a personal level.

Organisational Communication

Good organisational communication can help an organisation increase market share and competitiveness, improve customer service and satisfaction, and keep employees motivated and engaged. Poor or no communication, on the other hand, can be extremely destructive.

The communication landscape is more complex than ever before. We have a myriad of different channels at our disposal; audiences are more selective in how they use and react to these channels, and it is almost impossible to quantify the number of messages that compete for the attention of those audiences.

People learn and process information in many different ways. Research tells us that we retain 10% of what we read; 20% of what we hear; 30% of what we see; 50% of what we see and hear; 70% of what we discuss; 80% of what we experience; and 95% of what we share and communicate to others. On this basis, sending an email to engage an audience is probably not going to set the world on fire in its own right!

In considering organisational communication it is important to distinguish between formal and informal communication. The most common form of formal communication within an organisation is communication downward (vertically) through the hierarchical structure of the organisation arising from top management level.

Many organisations attempt to facilitate upward communication within organisations through measures such as staff surveys and suggestion schemes. Staff surveys are often used to help the organisation identify actions that will improve performance. But this in itself often presents its own potential problems and leads to misleading information being supplied to management.

By managing the proper integration across this mix of activities, a communicating organisation ensures that information not only flows up and down within the organisation but also flows across functional teams and between itself and external stakeholders, including its customers and suppliers.

So what forms of communication should you be thinking about for your internal communications?

Key Themes for Effective Internal Communication

1. A Shared Vision

"If you don't care where you're going, then it doesn't matter which way you go."

—Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

If your people don't understand where they're going, why they're going there and what happens for them on the journey and more importantly when they get there – guess what, you don't have motivated, engaged and passionate employees. If they don't care where they're going, you've got a much bigger problem!

Communicating the vision of an organisation, a team or a new direction is an opportunity to invigorate the work force, explain the challenges ahead, and tell your story. It is an opportunity lost if it does not enrol the workforce in a call to action and stir people's passions. So many times in my career, have I seen company vision statements that have been developed by senior managers or an agency and delivered via posters and mouse mats, and then management wonder why their people don't immediately change their behaviours and get behind it?

Ideally you should work with your people to shape your vision. If your organisation is small enough, use everyone and get their input. If you work in a larger business use a good cross-section of people from all levels and departments. Where possible use your 'rising stars' that are passionate about, not only the organisation, but also driving change and influencing others.

I can thoroughly recommend [Full Steam Ahead](#) by Ken Blanchard and Jesse Lyn Stoner if you want to learn more around creating a shared vision for your business.

2. Senior Leadership Involvement

Visible buy-in and engagement at the top is essential. Ensure that the head of your organisation is fully briefed on internal communications, has an opportunity to shape the strategy and is fully involved in key internal communications. This is important not only as the CEO is a key communications channel, but also because his or her behaviour will help set expectations for transparency and authenticity. Consider opportunities to demonstrate a real commitment to information sharing, in order to illustrate that information hoarding is not acceptable within your organisation's performance or culture.

It's also important that the wider senior leadership team are bought into whatever you are communicating. At best they won't be reinforcing the messages you are trying to get across. At worst, they could be sabotaging your efforts.

3. Understand Your Audience

Understanding your audience is crucial to building a successful communications plan; the bigger the message and impact on the organisation, the more important the analysis. Before you communicate with your people, there is some basic information you need to discover about them. Ask them how they feel about the current level of internal communication. Discern whether they feel informed about changes, if they feel comfortable sharing their opinions, and how they would like to see communication improve.

Ask the hard questions. See if they would be willing to share specific examples of when they felt out of the loop or ignored. Try not to be defensive when they share; listen with an open mind. Identify how employees like to receive information: email, newsletter, face-to-face, or other options. Ask if the method depends on what information is shared. For example, a weekly announcement can be communicated via email, but a major staff change needs to be shared in person.

4. Employee Engagement

There is nothing worse than being preached to or what I call communicating 'at'. Your people will not get behind this kind of communication. Make sure that communication is two-way and you build in mechanisms to capture feedback, tweak your messages to your audience and keep reinforcing your message. Marketers often get bored if they have to do a 'campaign' more than once or twice. The rule of 7 is a traditional marketing practice that suggests people must see a marketing message 7 times before they take action. When communicating messages, whether to internal or external customers, the concepts remain the same. Think of on-going communication with your teams; communicate it often and through various delivery methods.

What's In It for Me? Employees will internalise any message communicated. How will this affect me? What does this mean to me? Will it make my job harder? These questions are natural. The more relevant our messaging, the more our employee will be comfortable with the message.

Paint a picture of what this may look like: use examples representative of your audience. This kind of communication engages and excites employees, promotes teamwork and aligns everyone toward achieving company goals.

5. Line Manager Reinforcement




It's no secret that the relationship between a line manager/team leader and their team has the most direct impact on engagement. Focus on the behaviour change and require managers to report results on actions they've taken to impact engagement in their teams. This should be weighted as an indication of performance when someone manages others directly.

Regular team briefings with managers can improve relationships and help your people feel involved and informed about developments that affect them. Cascade team briefings can quickly disseminate key messages throughout the organisation. This method is also very effective at quashing grapevine rumours.

The team environment means that no one is overlooked and it reinforces group motivation. Team briefings should not replace regular team meetings with the staff's line manager – which is the most popular form of communication – but the brief can be given at the start of the team meeting.

A system for feeding back and responding to questions from staff should also be built in to the process. You need to monitor the system regularly to ensure that it is operating effectively across the organisation.

6. Multi-channel Communication Tools

-  Face to Face Communication - Wherever possible and practical, employee communication should take place face-to-face. In-person exchanges are the most effective and trusted forms of internal communication. What's more, that direct conversation can also unravel otherwise effective communications activities such as newsletters and intranet content if the spokesperson fails to establish trust or authenticity. Design communication strategies and tactics around meaningful opportunities for face-to-face exchange. If distance is a challenge, explore the use of web conferences as a means of bridging that geographical gap rather than relying on the passive and cold medium of email.
-  'Live Meetings' – with the advent of applications like Microsoft Lync you can reach large numbers of people quickly, effectively and across the globe with multimedia interactive broadcasts to get your message across. These meetings can be extremely interactive if planned well and more personal than email or a conference call.
-  Enterprise Social Media - It's no secret that social media is transforming the way people communicate in the workplace. As more and more companies are realising the value of engaging their employees online, social media is quickly becoming a preferred way of increasing knowledge sharing, encouraging teamwork and collaboration and adding value to the employee experience. To this effect, many businesses and organisations are using social media tools, like forums, blogs and social networks, to enable their staff and stakeholders to converse, collaborate and connect – Chatter via Salesforce.com and Yammer being two fast-growing enterprise-wide examples. Using social media as part of your internal communications plan has a number of benefits. For one, companies are able to have real-time, authentic conversations with employees. Plus the very nature of social media means

that anyone can participate in discussions, allowing communication to flow from the top down, bottom up, and even from side to side. If you are part of a national or global company it also means you can connect with people all over the world on a more involved level than just email and phone.

- 🌱 Blogging - Blogs are a better communication tool when you want to get information out to people, and want to enable feedback, but keep the original text intact. Internal blogging is frequently used to communicate activities like product development, support issues, product releases, planning events and conferences, providing informal updates on miscellaneous issues. Blogs usually encourage readers to comment, provide feedback open dialogue and exchange ideas in an informal context.
- 🌱 Intranet – Unless heavily adopted and promoted in your organisation, intranets are not the best place to ‘engage’ employees. They’re great to store information, get someone’s mobile number, read policies, log a fault on your PC and catch up on things when you have time. They’re not great by themselves to enrol your people in your message!
- 🌱 Email - Email is a good system for keeping track of conversations and saves on time and energy. You can email large groups of people and ensure that they were aware of the discussion because there is a common expectation of reading emails regularly. However emails are impersonal if used to large groups, prone to all types of mistakes and often ignored if used regularly.

7. Continuously Measure Effectiveness

Measurement is always an important part of any form of communication strategy, but it is especially relevant in the case of employee communication. Setting up clear indicators of performance will be vital in calibrating the strategy and tactics with appropriate precision. Internal communication may be deployed to track against outcomes such as morale, retention, recruitment, productivity, job satisfaction and/or employee safety. Being clear about “what success looks like,” and establishing internal alignment around that end state is instrumental to having high impact employee communication programs that deliver results.

Personal Communication

Effective communication remains at the heart of business. It is a crucial skill that must be mastered in order to be successful, even in today’s twitter-based world. While literacy levels continue to fall and good expression seems irrelevant to many, the ability to convey your message effectively will help you and your organisation stand out from the crowd.

From short emails, to mission statements, to large business proposals, effective communication is a skill you cannot afford to be without. If you can make your point or present a case clearly, you have a better chance of influencing people, gaining their support and motivating them. If you can give people clear instructions and information, they are better equipped for the tasks asked of them. It could be the thing that helps you win that big client or a promotion!

Each person has a unique communication style. By getting to know your style, you can achieve greater self-awareness and learn how to develop more effective interpersonal relations with colleagues, customers and even at home. Accurate self-knowledge is truly the starting point for effectiveness at work. Understanding other people’s communication styles improves working relationships by increasing our acceptance of other people and their way of doing things.

I personally find the DISC model and Myers Briggs the most useful tools to help you understand communication styles. Once you have established your natural communication style you can start to think about how you can adapt your style to drive the right outcomes with others. Adapting your

communication style is not about changing who you are nor is it about changing your intended message. Adapting your communication style choice is only about conveying your intended message in the manner that the other person is going to be best able to receive and understand it.

The diagram below, based upon the DISC model, shows the four basic communicator styles: They tend to be called different names depending on the methodology used, but they're all pretty similar.

| Relator | Socialiser |
|--|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Let's work together</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Slow down and build step-by-step</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Let's do something creative</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Speed up and have fun</p> |
| Thinker | Director |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Let's do it right</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Slow down and be right</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Just do it!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Speed up and talk business</p> |

How to interact with each style:

Relators

Relators like to work with groups and build relationships. Security is important to them and they like consistency and focusing on areas of specialisation. You should:

- 🌱 Be sincere and personable
- 🌱 Take an interest in him or her as a person
- 🌱 Be patient in drawing them out
- 🌱 Use open-ended questions
- 🌱 Present new ideas in a non-threatening manner
- 🌱 Give plenty of time to adjust
- 🌱 Clearly define individual goals and roles
- 🌱 Offer and provide personal support
- 🌱 Focus on the benefit of his or her contribution to the group

Socialisers

Socialisers like recognition and pride themselves on being popular. They like freedom of speech and freedom from control and detail. They work best in an open environment. You should:

- 🌱 Create a positive, friendly environment
- 🌱 Give them plenty of opportunities to speak about ideas, people, and their intuition
- 🌱 Engage them with stimulating and fun activities
- 🌱 Reinforce conversations with written documentation
- 🌱 Foster a democratic relationship

- 🌱 Incorporate incentives for taking risks
- 🌱 Encourage him or her in thinking outside of the box

Thinkers

Thinkers know there's a place for everything and everything should be in its place. Correctness and exactness are highly valued. You should:

- 🌱 Take time to prepare your case in advance
- 🌱 Make an appointment
- 🌱 Provide both the pros and cons of your plan
- 🌱 Support your ideas with volumes of data
- 🌱 Assure that you've eliminated all surprises
- 🌱 Provide a detailed plan with a precise explanation of how it fits in the big picture
- 🌱 Stay focused on the issue when disagreeing
- 🌱 Be prepared to provide many explanations with patience and persistence

Directors

Directors must be in charge. They pride themselves on achievement and focus on results. The bigger the challenge, the better they feel. You should:

- 🌱 Provide direct answers
- 🌱 Get to the point
- 🌱 Be brief
- 🌱 Stick to business
- 🌱 Show how your plan will get results, solve problems, and allow this individual to be in charge
- 🌱 Identify ways in which your idea will benefit the Director
- 🌱 Ask questions that focus on "what," not "how"
- 🌱 Avoid direct disagreement

Communication Basics

There are 3 skills you need to hone to be an effective communicator, namely listening, speaking and writing. You won't be astonished to read that, I hope! However, you would be surprised at how little effort people invest in them.

Listening

Listening is really where all good communication begins. Misunderstanding what another person is saying is one of the biggest obstacles to communication. Each of us sees the world in a unique way, and we usually assume that everyone sees it the same way we do.

Below are some barriers to effective listening. You'll probably recognise that most of them apply to you at one time or another.

- 🌱 We can think faster than a speaker can talk, and jump to conclusions
- 🌱 We are distracted and allow our minds to wander
- 🌱 We lose patience, and decide we are not interested
- 🌱 We overreact to what's said and react emotionally
- 🌱 We interrupt

So how do you become a generous listener?

1. **Don't talk. Listen.** People want a chance to get their own ideas and opinions across. A good listener lets them do it. If you interrupt the speaker or put limitations on your listening time, the speaker will get the impression that you're not interested in what he is saying -- even if you are. So be courteous and give the speaker your full attention.

2. **Don't jump to conclusions.** Many people tune out a speaker when they think they have the gist of their conversation or know what they're going to say next. Assumptions can be dangerous. Maybe the speaker is not following the same train of thought that you are, or is not planning to make the point you think they are. If you don't listen, you may miss the real point the speaker is trying to get across.

3. **Listen for the 'unsaid'.** Concentrate on what is not being said as well as what is being said. Remember, a lot of clues to meaning come from the speaker's tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. People don't always say what they mean, but their body language is usually an accurate indication of their attitude and emotional state.

4. **Ask questions.** If you are not sure of what the speaker is saying, ask. It's perfectly acceptable to say, "Do you mean . . . ?" or "Did I understand you to say . . . ?" It's also a good idea to repeat what the speaker has said in your own words to confirm that you have understood him correctly.

5. **Don't get distracted.** Don't let yourself be distracted by the environment or by the speaker's appearance, accent, mannerisms, or word use. Paying too much attention to these distractions can break your concentration and make you miss the point of the conversation.

6. **Be open-minded.** Don't just listen for statements that back up your own opinions and support your beliefs, or for certain parts that interest you. The point of listening, after all, is to gain new information. Be willing to listen to someone else's point of view and ideas. A subject that may seem boring or trivial at first can turn out to be fascinating, if you listen with an open mind.

7. **Provide feedback.** Make eye contact with the speaker. Show him you understand his talk by nodding your head, maintaining an upright posture, and, if appropriate, interjecting an occasional comment such as "I see" or "that's interesting" or "really." The speaker will appreciate your interest and feel that you are really listening.

Hearing is natural. Generous listening is a skill that we learn.



Speaking

We're not all born with a natural talent for public speaking or getting our message across effectively. Many people lack confidence in their ability to express themselves verbally – not necessarily all the time, but perhaps in certain situations or circumstances. However, talking to one another does tend to make things happen! It is not always what is said, but how it is said that can make the difference between good and poor speaking skills

A good speaker:

- 🌿 Relates to the listener
- 🌿 Is respectful of others
- 🌿 Encourages trust
- 🌿 Shows empathy
- 🌿 Is purposeful and clear
- 🌿 Uses appropriate vocabulary
- 🌿 Speaks with fluency
- 🌿 Is confident and credible
- 🌿 Is approachable and responsive
- 🌿 Uses body language well
- 🌿 Involves listeners
- 🌿 Enables participation
- 🌿 Knows what to leave out
- 🌿 Generates interest
- 🌿 Uses silence well
- 🌿 Varies pitch/pace/tone according to the situation
- 🌿 Is passionate about their topic



By far the best way to improve your verbal communication skills is to practice, particularly in areas where you are least confident. Put yourself in situations that require you to communicate effectively, be that one to one, or to a group. Speak at work. Speak at your child's school. Speak at a town hall meeting. Speak in your car. Speak in front of the mirror.

You won't ever achieve perfection. But you will improve. Little by little, your practice will result in improvement. Feedback is crucial to improving your speaking skills, so take the good and the not so good on board and work on those areas for improvement

Writing

The first step to writing clearly is choosing the appropriate format. Do you need to send an informal email? Write a detailed report? Create an advert? Or write a formal letter?

The format, as well as your audience, will define your "writing voice" – that is, how formal or relaxed the tone should be. For instance, if you write an email to a prospective client it should have a different tone to that of an email to a friend.

Start by identifying who will read your message. Is it targeted at senior managers, your team, or to customers? With everything you write, your readers, or recipients, should define your tone as well as aspects of the content.

Composition and Style

Once you know what you're writing, and for whom you're writing, you actually have to start writing.

Start with your audience – Remember, your readers may know nothing about what you're telling them. What do they need to know first?

Create an outline – This is especially helpful if you're writing a longer document such as a report, presentation, or speech. Outlines help you identify which steps to take in which order, and they help you break the task up into manageable pieces of information.

What's in it for the audience? – For instance, if you're writing a sales letter for prospective clients, why should they care about your product or sales pitch? What's the benefit for them? Remember your audience's needs at all times.

Identify your main theme – If you're having trouble defining the main theme of your message, pretend that you have 15 seconds to explain your position. What do you say? This is likely to be your main theme.

Use simple language – Unless you're writing a technical guide, it's usually best to use simple, direct language. Don't use long words just to impress people.

Structure

Your document should be as "reader friendly" as possible. Use headings, subheadings, bullet points, and numbering whenever possible to break up the text.

After all, what's easier to read – a page full of long paragraphs, or a page that's broken up into short paragraphs, with section headings and bullet points? A document that's easy to scan will get read more often than a document with long, dense paragraphs of text.

Headers should grab the reader's attention. Using questions is often a good idea, especially in advertising copy or reports, because questions help keep the reader engaged and curious.

In emails and proposals, use short, factual headings and subheadings, like the ones in this article.

Adding pictures is also a smart way to break up your text. These visual aids not only keep the reader's eye engaged, but they can communicate important information much more quickly than text.

Good luck with improving your Personal Communication!

