We all need communications in the workplace, to keep us informed and help us make decisions. This chapter introduces the corporate communications process and covers some of the areas that should be addressed when communicating at work.
The Art of Communications

On the surface, the world of corporate communications is a simple one: we all communicate, all of the time, so why should it be a problem?

But despite its apparent simplicity, successful communications is a skill like any other in the workplace and one that needs to be constantly worked at and developed. Most importantly, if the communications process goes wrong, then this can have very adverse effects on an organization.

Real advice, for the real world
The aim of this book is to look at the various elements of the communications process in the workplace, with particular emphasis on internal communications: if you cannot communicate successfully with people in your own organization then there is less chance you will be able to do so externally. The book will look at the various methods of communication that are available and also how to implement a communications strategy and evaluate the effectiveness of your communications process.

As with most things in the business world, there is a lot of theory about corporate communications, that does not necessarily translate to what is happening in the real world. But the art of good communications is to ensure that the right people get the right information, at the right time. It sounds simple and, if you do it right, it can be.

Knowing why you are communicating
Corporate communications is not something that should be done for the sake of it, or because your organization feels the need to have a communications section. You should have a clear idea about why you are communicating and this is why a communications strategy is important. This should tie-in with your organization’s corporate objectives and set out a clear roadmap about how the communications process is going to help achieve these objectives.
However, this is not to say that the communications process is all about high-level strategy, far from it. The way we all communicate in the workplace, from body language, to email, to written reports, has an impact on colleagues and, ultimately, the whole business.

**Knowing how to communicate**

In the modern world of communications, there are a vast array of tools at our disposal:

- Web
- Email
- Social media
- Video
- Paper
- One-to-one

All of these, and more, have an important part to play in corporate communications but they should not be viewed in isolation.

**Being flexible**

In the world of communications no two days are the same; you should always expect the unexpected. Because of this, you should always be ready to think on your feet and change your mind, and your plans, if necessary. This does not mean that you should change things at the drop of a hat, but you should always have the flexibility to assess a situation and move with events as they happen if required.

**Honesty is the only policy**

Being involved with communications in the workplace can be a powerful position as you have the chance to influence the way your organization operates. Therefore it is important that you are always open and honest in the way you communicate, either with individuals or with the organization as a whole.

Sometimes it may seem like the easy option to get out of a difficult situation, but if you are evasive or dishonest in the way in which you communicate you will undoubtedly get found out sooner or later. Once this trust is lost it is very hard to get back.
Ten Common Mistakes

It can sometimes be easy pointing out mistakes and none of us are perfect. The rest of the book aims to show how to avoid and overcome some of the issues that lead to ineffective communications in the workplace. However, the following are some of the areas in which people go wrong when they try and tackle the seemingly straightforward world of communications:

- Underestimating the complexity of the subject. Effective communications is a multi-faceted and multi-discipline function and anyone who thinks it can be mastered quickly and easily may be sadly disappointed.

- Hiding behind corporate jargon. Corporate jargon is the scourge of the effective communicator. Always remember your audience and communicate at an appropriate level. The overuse of corporate jargon is frequently a sign of insecurity and this is used as a barrier to hide behind.

- Letting work pile up. If you are disorganized then you will quickly become overcome with your workload and the communications process will suffer. If you cannot do something yourself, do not be afraid to delegate it, with clear and appropriate instructions. Keep on top of emails, even if it is just to get back to people to say that you are dealing with their enquiry and give them a timescale for when you will get back to them again. Leaving people not knowing what is going on is one of the worst things in communications.

- Being indecisive. If you keep changing your mind, or cannot make it up in the first place, then you will create an atmosphere of confusion and resentment. Once you have made a decision, stick to it even if it ultimately may appear to be incorrect.

Hot tip

If you receive a large number of emails, try and put aside some time everyday to deal with them. This way they should not pile up.
Making excuses. Even with the best intentions, things sometimes go wrong. If they do, the best thing is usually to accept responsibility and apologize. Do not try and blame other people as this will just breed mistrust and discontent.

Avoiding passing on bad news. Sometimes in the business world it is inevitable that you will have to give out bad news, either individually or as an organization. This should be approached head-on, but in as positive a way as possible.

Being afraid to ask for advice. Asking for advice is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of wanting to check to make sure you are doing things correctly.

Pretending to be an expert in everything. Due to the number of channels in the world of communications, no-one knows everything about every aspect of this discipline. One way to increase your own expertise is to be open and admit if you do not know everything about a certain area, rather than trying to just bluff it. This will not only improve your own knowledge but also gain greater respect from other people.

Thinking that style can make up for a lack of substance. It is important to make communications look stylish and attractive. However, this should not be at the expense of the message itself.

Ignoring your key customers. When communications go wrong it is frequently because the communicators think they are creating something just for the benefit of their boss or the people above them in the management chain i.e. they are just trying to impress their managers. However, the most important people are those for whom a message is intended. This is usually the rest of the staff in the organization and these should be considered your key customers.

Good communicators do not necessarily have to be liked within an organization, but they definitely have to be respected in order to do an effective job.
Why Does it Have to be so Hard?

Frequently, when someone is asked to create a piece of communication, the immediate reaction is to produce something as long and complicated as possible. This is often driven by the person who has asked for the piece of work in the first place: since communications is viewed as being a very visual discipline a lot of managers and senior staff equate quality with the size of a document. In some cases, more emphasis is given to the weight of a document than to the content, almost literally in some cases. This can be seen as a lack of security by managers, as if they are seeking protection behind a wall of words. However, this can be a problem for the person creating the piece of work, since the aim of successful communications is to get your message across, rather than needlessly bumping up the word count for the sake of filling pages. Indeed, unnecessarily long documents can be counter-productive in terms of their usefulness. Even the most dedicated managers may find it hard to drag themselves through long documents, that are peppered with corporate jargon for good measure.

If you want to create documents that are meaningful and will get read, and hopefully acted upon, then think shorter rather than longer. This is a good discipline in terms of the size of the final document but it is also a good way to plan your writing. Before you start, note down the key points that you need to get across and also the conclusion that you want to deliver. This will then give your document a precise structure. When you start writing, stick to this structure and if a point only needs one paragraph then give it that and do not feel the need to pad something out just to make it look more impressive.
Considering your audience

When creating communication documents, or online content, it is not only a question of keeping your superiors happy. At the end of the day, it is your target audience who will be your harshest critics if you do not get it right. So ultimately you have to tailor your writing and content for the people who will be consuming it.

When writing for your target audience there are a number of benefits in keeping things as tight and concise as possible:

- It should be easier to understand. If you cut out all of the unnecessary items in a document or report then you should be left with content that is clearer, since there are fewer redundant items.

- There is less chance of confusion and misunderstanding if you stick to the key messages and these points are easier to identify. This should help people understand the messages and then act upon them correctly.

- If you follow the ‘less is more’ philosophy, the end user should be able to consume the content quickly and then get on with other things. In this way clear communications should be seen as something that aids productivity as well as creating a better informed workforce.

- You will begin to get the reputation as a clear communicator. This is something that can be hard to achieve but if people think you are giving them the right information in a digestible form then they will begin to start trusting your communication skills.

Building on success

If you have produced a short, clear piece of communications that has gone down well with your target audience you can build on this success with future items. If there are follow-ups to the original item, these should be produced in the same style and issued whenever there is information to communicate: it is better to regularly issue shorter pieces of communications rather than save them up and lump them together in one document or report. But never become complacent: always look at any type of communications and ask yourself whether there is anything there that is redundant or not pulling its weight.

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Don’t forget

When you get something wrong there are usually people who are quick to tell you so. However, when you do something well the same is not always true. So, if you do not get any feedback from an item of communications that you have produced, this is probably a good sign.
Content is Still King

With the vast array of technology and communications channels now available to us it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that it is just a question of pushing out our communications to these channels and letting the technology do the rest. However, this is a common mistake made by communications professionals: regardless of the number of channels, content is still king. The old adage, ‘rubbish in, rubbish out’ is as true today as it always has been – at the end of the day people want to get the best information possible and will quickly spot if you are trying to give them an inferior product.

Before you consider which channels you want to use for your message, you have to make sure that the message itself is what you want to convey. This involves considering some of these areas:

- Who is the audience? Knowing with whom you are communicating is important in identifying the type of content to be used
- Identifying what you want to say
- Adapting the length to the message
- Saying it with clarity
- Considering the format

Good content means saying the right thing at the right time. This could be a single sentence or a 30 minute video. The key is to know what you want to say and then say it as effectively as possible, using the available channels.

People will quickly identify good content and it will have two important effects: they will understand what you are trying to say to them and they will want to come back and see what else you want to tell them. This means that you have a receptive audience the next time you want to communicate a key message. However, this does not mean that you should become complacent: goodwill from an audience can be hard won, but it can be lost in an instant with a piece of poor or shoddy communication.

When creating content, remember to make every word, phrase and sentence count – if it is not needed, then leave it out.

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Hot tip
Ideally, there should be a Content Editor in each Communications section. This role is responsible for checking content across all communication channels to ensure consistency and accuracy.
Setting Clear Objectives

Before you start creating any piece of communications, it is vital to have a clear objective of two things:

- The message you want to get across
- What you want to achieve with the message

So, if you want to communicate information about a change in an organization you will first have to identify the message. For instance, it could be a change in your organization’s Absence Procedure.

Initially, the message would be the following:

- Inform people of the changes. It is important that people know about planned changes, before they happen. This will enable them to prepare themselves and take any steps that are necessary for when the changes take place.

- Inform people of their responsibilities and those of their managers. Everyone has to know what their role is to be during any period of change and the communications that is associated with it. This is equally applicable if you are taking a passive role (just consuming the communications and information) or an active role (implementing the communications and changes).

- Detail any actions that have to be undertaken. Most objectives require actions to be taken to achieve them. This can range from someone reading a piece of communications aimed at them, to a team putting together a policy or procedure. This is another area that should be clearly defined, so that everyone knows what they are doing, and why.

- Flag up the next stage of the process. Leaving people in limbo as to what is happening next can be the death knell for any communications process. Make sure that you have a clear timetable of what is going to happen and a timescale.

Don’t forget

Try and make the timescale realistic, but if it changes, don’t be afraid to tell people this.
So the structure of the communications, in terms of main headings, could be:

- So What is Happening?
- Why is it Happening?
- What Do I Need to Do?
- What Does My Manager Need to Do?
- Timetable of Key Dates
- What Happens Next?

Once you have identified the message you want to get across you should identify your objectives in terms of what you want to achieve with the communications exercise. This should be done for both individuals and the organization as a whole. The objectives should be two-fold:

- Ensure everyone understands the message. This involves evaluating the message in terms of seeking feedback and holding follow-up exercises such as focus groups.
- Use the message to bring about successful change in the organization. This is the ultimate goal and again requires some targeted evaluation at the end of the exercise.

Measurements could be put in place to find out if staff and managers are implementing the new Absence Procedure effectively, which would be an indication that the communications has been successful. Ultimately the objective should be to see that the level of absence has fallen in the organization, which would be an indication that the communications has contributed to a successful change.

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Communications is only something that you can make up as you go along if there is an emergency or a crisis. For all other occasions there has to be clear planning and objective setting.
Getting the Right Team

Throughout our communication activities we must be ready and willing to react and innovate. In order to do so, we need to ensure that our communications team is connected to key areas throughout the business.

The team should be:

- Imaginative
- Creative
- Up to date with new technologies and therefore potential new channels
- Engaged and engaging
- Positive
- Respected by colleagues
- Open and approachable
- Flexible

However, especially in times when budgets are tight, we also require people who are:

- Pragmatic
- Have an understanding of the business context and corporate barriers and pressures

These characteristics and attributes are the key ingredients of communication teams which provide valuable business support.

As with all other areas of business; we are only as good as our people. Being involved at each stage, understanding our audience, evaluating our activities will all count for nothing if we have the wrong people involved.
Creating Your Strategy

The first point to note when looking to create an effective communications strategy is that there is not a single approach which will work in all circumstances. Many organizations have a standard procedure which they use when communicating with colleagues and this procedure can be utilized without adequate thought given to the actual message being communicated.

Creating a communications strategy can be seen as a journey and, as with any journey, there are certain things that we need to understand and decide:

• Where we are currently
• Where we want to go
• How we intend to get there

It is inevitable that there will be obstacles along the way, however, by having the right tools and people at our disposal, an understanding of our environment and a clear map of our route; we can reach our goal.

Tailoring your approach

You may therefore hear talk of a single communications strategy and this “one size fits all” approach, while perhaps being suitable for everyday, straightforward pieces of communication, is not the way forward when dealing with communications in support of projects or business changes. You have to think of the best approach to fit the message, the aims and the audience.

Think of approaching the development of a comms strategy as an art rather than a science

In fact, it is more appropriate to think of approaching the development of a comms strategy as an art rather than a science. The rigid step-by-step approach will not allow us to capture the essential requirements for each particular strategy. There needs to be creativity, imagination and flexibility when creating an effective communications strategy.
An effective communications strategy will support the change being delivered throughout the lifecycle of that change: from the scoping/discovery phase, through development, implementation, evaluation and finally as we revisit the change in order to consider building and developing further.

Each stage will be supported by communication activities:

- Set the communication objectives, or goals – keep them SMART. This stands for: Specific, i.e. it has to be a clearly defined objective such as 'By the end of the year you will produce six training videos'; Measurable, i.e. it is something that you can measure or count once it has been completed; Achievable, i.e. it has to be something that you know the person is capable of doing; Realistic, i.e. you both have to agree that it can be done in the way it is set out; and Timely, i.e. there is a timeframe in which to achieve the objective.

- Ensure knowledge of subject, audience and context. It is essential that the communications team has a thorough understanding of these elements so that they can create the strategy accordingly and also respond to questions and feedback about different topics.

- Sculpt the message. It is rare for a communications message to be perfect first time, so it is necessary to keep redrafting and evaluating until you are confident that you have the best final product possible.

- Select the communication channels to be used. See Chapter Two for the range of channels that are potentially available.

- Evaluate. This should be done throughout the process and you should not be afraid to change things as a result of feedback from evaluation.

- Build and develop. This is the phase where you implement the elements of your communications strategy and start to create the different products.

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*Hot tip*

It is essential that objectives are measurable, so that you can display the value that they are delivering to the organization.
Measuring Success

It was Oscar Wilde who said, “What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” And that is the rub: how do you measure and evaluate something as intangible as communications?

Proving value
Communication channels and activities are seen by some (we will call them cynics) to be expensive and unnecessary. It is not true of course, but at any time, and in particular in the current financial climate, it is vital to be able to prove the value of your Communications section and your comms channels. If you cannot, then be prepared to lose them.

For this reason it is crucial to introduce a degree of governance around all of your comms, whether it is for a single piece of communications, or communications for an entire project. Do not allow communications in support of a project to simply become a tick-the-box exercise. Project managers will be required to show that they have included their communications strategy in their project plan, but often this is done with no great conviction.

Get involved at project startup
Ensure from the outset that communications is represented on the project team and project board. Communications should not be an afterthought and something that is done just before a new project or initiative is launched. It should be embedded into the process from the start and everyone should be aware of the importance of including communications.

It is vital to be able to prove the value of your Communications section and your comms channels.
Plan
It is absolutely imperative that all parties fully understand what is required from communications. Take time to plan your strategy:

- Agree on what the project expects from communications
- Who will be responsible for doing what
- What success will look like
- How this will be measured

Evaluate – Tweak – Evaluate
Projects come to an end and therefore communications relating to a project will be finite pieces of work. Our day to day channels, however, do not stop. A one-off evaluation of, for example, our intranet will lead to some conclusions and ideas for improvement. Once these improvements have been made do not think it is job done. Put in place a programme of evaluation and if something is not delivering do not be afraid to alter it, replace it or even remove it.

You cannot evaluate and improve everything continuously, but by following your program you can ensure a cycle of evaluation which tests each channel as regularly as required.

What makes something worthwhile?
Oscar Wilde would not have much time for modern day directors of finance. When it is all down to profit and loss it is very easy to see whether something delivers benefit. If the figure at the bottom is greater than the figure at the top then it is all rosy and we can normally carry on without that dreaded knock on our door.
Why Does it Have to be so Hard?

Beyond the bottom line

The problem we have is that not everything boils down to the bottom line. Our project or comms channel may be designed to:

- Change staff/customer behavior
- Improve satisfaction in the workplace
- Improve the quality of work
- Or simply to inform

Success in these areas can be more difficult to demonstrate, but by defining and getting agreement on success up front we will have a strong foundation on which to build.

Another common problem can be a project which will run for a long period of time. We cannot afford to reach the end and realize that we have failed to achieve our stated communication objectives.

In such a case it is advisable to set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These are our quantifiable critical success factors which are used to measure progress towards the stated final outcome. KPIs should be set within the project plan.

Why we evaluate

Evaluation provides the element of governance which helps us to know what works and what does not. It will provide the evidence we require to know whether an activity needs to be tweaked, removed or perhaps rolled out further.

More commonly these days, evaluation is the evidence we need to justify continued investment and is therefore a critical task in workplace communications.

Due to the nature of communications, evaluating it is not always an exact science and elements such as morale and organizational reputation should be considered. Therefore there should always be flexibility when considering the evaluation of communications.
Establishing Buy-in

If your audience does not believe what you are saying to them and, as a result, do not want to act upon it then this has serious consequences for the communications process and, ultimately, the whole organization. Staff have to have faith and belief in the communications process and it is essential to secure their buy-in to the way information is given to them. Establishing buy-in can be achieved by using some of the following:

- Showing the bigger picture. As communications objectives should be derived from the overall corporate objectives, it is important to communicate how certain things will help to achieve the bigger picture targets. For instance, if you are communicating about a new absence procedure, this should be shown to be an attempt to help individuals improve their own absences from work, which then help the business to be more productive and profitable, which ultimately is beneficial for all staff.

- Answering, ‘What’s in it for me?’ However altruistic we may claim to be at times, at the end of the day most of us want to know how certain objectives and initiatives are going to affect us individually. All communications should be aimed at showing how everyone will benefit from something, or at least how it will affect them. This may be in terms of explaining how organizational targets will benefit individuals, or showing how certain policies or initiatives will impact on the whole workforce.

- Issuing regular updates. This is particularly important for initiatives that span a considerable period of time. If long periods elapse with no news being issued, then people will become frustrated about the lack of information and start to make up their own rumors and gossip. The best way to avoid this is to issue updates even when there has been no change. Be open and say this and, if necessary, explain why there has been no change. Set out a regular timetable for updates, and stick to it.

Don’t forget

When creating a piece of communication, think of directing it at an individual, rather than just the whole organization. This will help to give it a more personal feel.
Being Inclusive

Everyone in an organization is responsible for the communications process, whether they realize it or not. Whether it is consuming communications that is aimed at them, or communicating with their colleagues, every individual is involved in the way information travels around a business. Therefore, when you are involved directly in the communications process it is important to make everyone included in the process.

Creating a sense of ownership

Being inclusive means thinking of every individual in an organization and making sure that they are included in the communications process. This should then give them a sense of ownership and make them believe that what is being said is ultimately for their benefit. If you cannot take people along with you in the communications process, then it is doomed from the start.

Some ways in which people can feel they are being included in how things are communicated include:

- Taking people’s views into account. Ask for feedback as frequently as possible, both in terms of the message that is being conveyed and also the method by which this is done. This will enable you to amend both, if required, based on what the staff say to you.

- Acting on feedback. It is pointless, and indeed counter-productive, to ask for feedback and then not act on it. If there are certain things that you cannot do, then do not ask for feedback that could result in that reply.

- Showing you have acted on feedback. Once you have received feedback and implemented any suggestions, it is important to highlight this: don’t be shy about showing what you have done. This shows staff that they are being listened to and that their views are being taken into account and acted upon.

If you cannot take people along with you in the communications process, then it is doomed from the start.