

Strategic Communications

A People & Culture White Paper

Introduction

“The British soldier is changing, we have more graduates, more intellect on the battlefield than ever before if you just ask them to take a hill they have the irritating habit of asking why!”

Brigadier General Sir Patrick Cordingly

Every battlefield commander will identify the **process** of communication as fundamental to the success of a military campaign. It is vital that the battlefield forces have the unfolding strategic context clear in their minds so they can make informed local decisions, confident as to how the outcome contributes to the overall strategic intent. The commander also needs the capability to continuously interact with the people on the ground, a two-way dialogue clarifying, modifying and adapting to feedback in response to the changing conditions across the battlefield. In this environment it is **understanding** rather than **communication** per se that saves lives.

It is axiomatic that such a process is equally vital in the corporate environment. Fundamental in fact to true employee engagement yet when we ask employees which aspect of their business is most “broken” from their perspective, almost without exception the answer is communications.

There is no doubting the organisational commitment to communication; businesses are striving hard to ensure their people are kept informed. But the results of this positive intent have compounded rather than resolved the problem. Employees are subjected to an endless flood of unidirectional, one way, downward communication. People are communicated **to** rather than **with**.

Communication is above all a two way process. A process that should enable a genuine discourse between staff and management, which implicitly means that soliciting, and acting upon feedback are critical to effective communication.

Where we have encountered efforts to improve the effectiveness of communications the collection, analysis and interpretation of feedback are rarely considered. Clarity, honesty, eye catching, creative, inspiring are all adjectives used in specifying a new approach to communications. Efforts are made to better align messages, audiences, media and timing but the truth of the matter is that these are hygiene factors, the price of entry to the communications game, the basics people might expect.

As well as the utilisation of feedback, it seems to us that the central immutable obstacle to effective communication is the failure to address the underlying human and psychological dimensions of how understanding is achieved and personal meaning created.

Human beings achieve understanding through discourse and discussion, by listening to and probing other perspectives, it is through this process we form the views and attitudes (personal meaning) that guide our behaviours.

The Problem

Communications are often felt to be the most broken of the employee processes. It is rarely two-way yet without feedback there can be no assessment of whether the communication has created the understanding required.

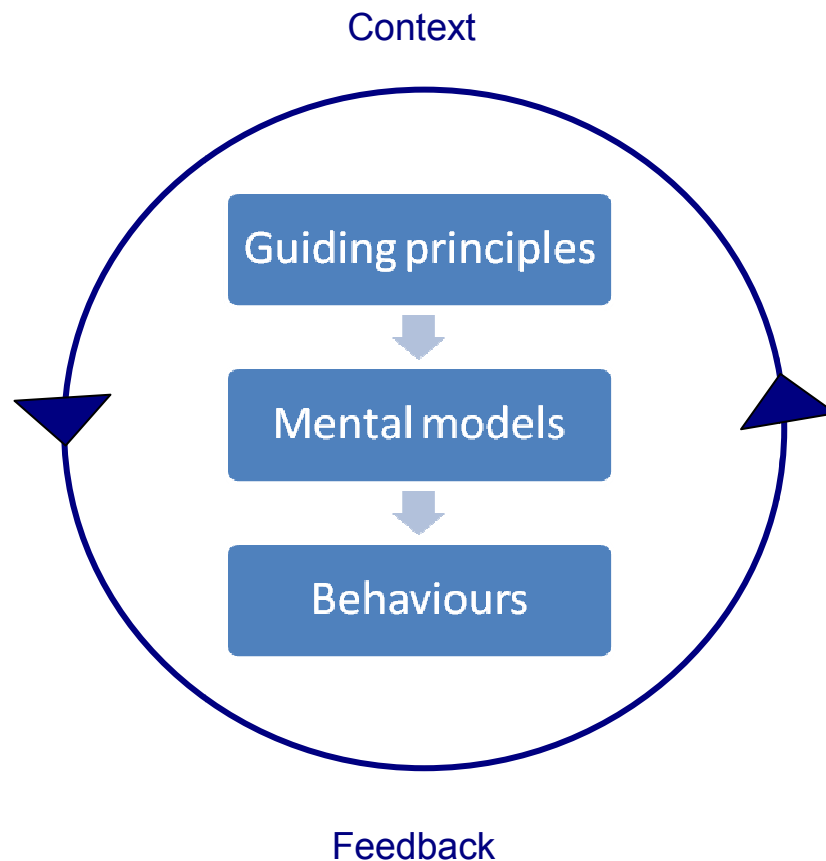
There are a number of facets to the problem:

- 1) There is a strong but erroneous belief in many organisations that good managers communicate well anyway – They don't! – Although in mitigation this may well be a function of how well they are communicated with.
- 2) Communication is not seen as a true process therefore the measurement rigor that would normally accompany a transaction process is not present. There are no reliable indicators of the level of understanding achieved or feedback on the actions or behaviours that arise as a result of the communication.
- 3) Communications are typically “tell” and “sell” in format and parent-child in tone. “This is what we are doing and this is why it is important that you do what we say”.
- 4) There is a tendency towards “spin” putting an overly positive hue on the subject matter, which results in cynicism and mistrust.
- 5) The electronic age of the intranet is leading to a seditious transfer of responsibility from the communicator who should be validating that the message has been received and satisfactorily understood to the individual who is increasingly expected to ensure they are up to date with information made available electronically.
- 6) All of our research respondents complained of being deluged with information. Often it's the same message couched slightly differently delivered through multiple, increasingly high tech media. The principle seems to be “say it often enough and creatively enough and eventually the message will get through”.

The Solution

Communication is only complete when there is feedback.

The strategic role of communications is to ensure the synchronicity of mental models across the organisation as to how and what it wants to achieve.



Communication is above all a two way process. The essential component of a strategic communications process is a mechanism that enables a genuine discourse between staff and management and enables the proactive solicitation of feedback.

It is through feedback that the effectiveness of the communication can be assessed.

Employees need context - they need to know what management is thinking about, not just what they are doing or intend to do but the issues they are considering, what they see as the opportunities, the threats, the plans they are developing and the alternatives they have considered, the rationale that lies behind decisions, the decision making criteria, customer

expectations and how they plan to meet them. Only then will employees be truly engaged with the business only then can empowerment take place. Without context empowerment is like giving the keys of a car to a five year old.

Once employees understand the business they can begin thinking creatively using their front-line knowledge and experience to offer practical solutions to important problems. They can question decisions that don't appear to make sense based on what they understand about the business and its processes. The use of such feedback removes blockages by collecting and acting upon peoples input, it removes the irritations and frustrations of not being consulted.

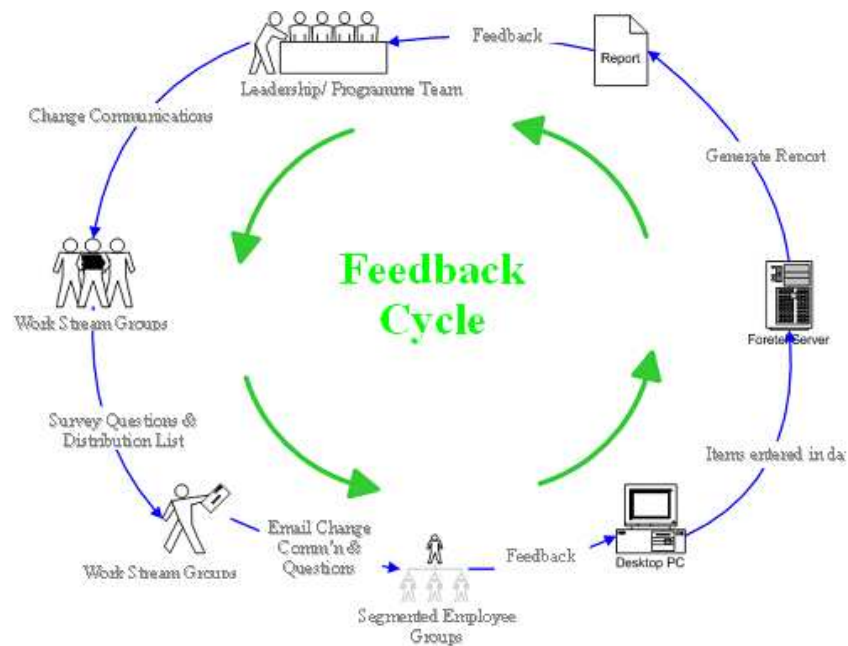
It directly addresses "Ivory Tower" syndrome by presenting people with the consequences of their actions. It provides a failsafe mechanism that allows potential problems to be identified early and resolved before they escalate to a significant level. In time it moves the organisation to a different level of employee involvement – **feed forward** - where the input is generated in advance and shapes decisions rather than being a reaction to them.

The following case study from a UK based financial institution is an excellent example of such a mechanism in action and shows how a communication mechanism can be engineered into the fabric of the organisation and used as the engine room for change

Case Study – Financial Services Communicating Strategic Change

The internal communication and briefing process operates on a monthly cycle. Dates for the briefings are scheduled in diaries months in advance as team meetings. Some 400 managers are involved each month in briefing their teams. Attending the briefings is not optional. The process operates as a cascade and overcomes the usual problems of hierarchical communication through the systematic collection and analysis of feedback. This creates a two-way dialogue that enables the clarification of communications as well as the ability to adapt and modify in response to real-time feedback.

Each month the process commences with the Executive Team creating the input to the process. They start by assessing what they wish to communicate from the discussions and decisions arising from this month's board meetings, they also consider the feedback from the previous months briefing and to which they need to respond. In addition the briefing encompasses business performance, changes in market conditions, the introduction of new initiatives and the progress of existing ones. The CEO starts the cycle by briefing the immediate senior managers and so on.



The briefing is formatted to generate discussion. It enables each employee to iterate with the briefing and identify issues and opportunities. Managers are encouraged to have “localised” the content prior to the briefing so it is meaningful for attendees. The briefings are *facilitated* in that rather than presenting and answering questions the team leaders prompt discussion around the input by asking:

Is there anything here we don't understand?

What does this mean for us?

What will we have to do differently as a consequence?

What opportunities or issues do we foresee?

How does this change our current priorities?

Because it is part of a team meeting the team can then plan and schedule their workload and priorities in the context of the business direction.

Team learning is also encouraged by asking what has gone well, or not gone so well, over the previous month what issues or problems are we facing that we can resolve collectively or feed to teams elsewhere in the organisation.

What differentiates this process from team briefing is the systematic collection of feedback. The outputs of the team dialogues are input into an electronic system by the facilitators and a real-time picture created across the entire organisation:

Did the teams understand the briefing?

Was it misinterpreted anywhere

Are there different levels of understanding created in different areas?

Have we created any unforeseen problems?

Where are the pinch points?

What are the key issues that the business is currently grappling with?

The technology enables this picture to be created at the point of understanding, structuring and assembling the feedback so that it is intelligible and actionable. Separate departmental reports are produced showing the feedback that has been generated elsewhere in the business that is relevant to them and their activities.

This enables the senior team to stay connected with the organisation and respond directly to issues and concerns, “last month you said...as a consequence we will...” They do not lose touch with the impact of their decisions by quickly moving on to the next priority without checking that the solutions and interventions they have put in place are doing their job effectively.

The understanding process is also used to involve and engage employees around specific issues (e.g. costs, compliance, process improvement, the role out of major systems etc.). Within seconds they can harness the collective thinking power of 4000 people.

Most importantly it keeps the organisation whole and integrated it ensures that on a monthly basis (rather than annually which is usually the case) that the plans and activities of teams across the business are aligned with corporate requirements. It enables flexibility and change ensuring that when the organisation needs to change direction it can do so quickly confident that its people not only understand the “what” but also the “why” and can flag issues with the “how”.

Finally the understanding process generates a host of improvement ideas and general feedback into the areas of the business that can utilise this data. It keeps the business close to its customers enabling continuous internal market research as to what customers are thinking, saying and doing and it provides measurement data to validate that mutual understanding is indeed being created.

Such a process helps overcome one of the major hurdles in achieving high quality organisation wide communication namely middle management.

Variously called the damp proof course (because nothing rises up), the permafrost layer (because nothing passes down) or the marzipan layer (because of the tendency to sweeten communications going in both directions), middle management is the communications challenge.

The process described in the case study reveals where communications are going astray through the evaluation of feedback. The current belief state of the organisation can be understood because people express beliefs as opinions, the issues raised reveal the level of understanding achieved and recurring patterns and blockages can be resolved.

Strategic Context

The biggest barrier to communication is the human tendency not to listen, not to understand the position of the communicator, but to evaluate and judge from the position of our own mindset, from our own frame of reference. A tendency that is exacerbated when things are tense or emotions are running high and then positions become entrenched, “I am 100% right and you are 100% wrong”.

It is a trait that we meet frequently in our interactions with organisations when the immediate response to a difficult piece of information is evaluative, then defensive, then critical, leading to the information being dismissed or rationalised. It is particularly apparent in the interaction between departments and functions. In fact it is the single most prevalent reason behind poor quality inter-team and inter-department relationships and results in negotiation and frustration rather than cooperation.

What is required is a major behavioural change to increase the amount of listening **with** and decrease the amount of evaluation **about**. Nothing contributes more to disengagement than the tendency of managers or departments to impose their own frame of reference on the situation. Engagement requires that the manager understand the position from the employee’s perspective and then, and only then, begin the process of dialogue that moves both parties closer to the objective truth and mutual understanding.

If I do not understand you I cannot engage with you, if you do not understand me you cannot be engaged.

In other words “Seek first to understand then to be understood”.

“In our business we are ruthlessly nice. We met some people from Unilever the other day,” they were interested in how we do business. We said, “be natural, be nice”. They went all earnestly, “that sounds great. Now how do you implement that strategy of being nice.”

Richard Reed Co – Founder of Innocent

We are frequently struck by the adversarial nature of communications between teams in organisations an attribute that often has its roots in the organisational politics. It manifests itself as debate rather than dialogue and in its power oriented confrontational style undermines not just communication but also harmonious working relationships and therefore employee engagement.

Debate carries with it a set of destructive and obstructive behaviours. It assumes that the answers are known, but only to one party, that the interaction is about winning and losing, proving a point or defending a position. From this arise incorrect perceptions, polarisations, unnecessary confrontations, righteousness and aggressive behaviour. But the principle issue is that it starts from an assumption that in this interaction there is an unequal power distribution, “I am right you are wrong.”

Dialogue however stems from the values of equality and sharing. It is about respect for the contributions of others a willingness to explore new possibilities, finding out, discussion, it is a vital environmental ingredient for creativity. For employees to be really engaged we need to move from a destructive form of input to a constructive form, where ideas are as important as analysis, from argument to a genuine exploration of the subject and that means organisations need to be very clear on the style of communication and interaction behaviour that is acceptable.

Implementing a strategic communication programme

- 1) Define the overall communications strategy
 - Communications objectives
 - Target audiences / stakeholders
 - Key operating principles
 - Measures of success
 - Implementation action plan
- 2) Undertake a detailed communication audit
 - What is working / not working for each target group
 - What are the blockages
- 3) Identify the feedback mechanisms and the evaluation process
 - Team brief
 - Employee satisfaction / engagement
 - Intranet
 - Blogs
 - Discussion groups / social networking
 - Captains table
- 4) Roll out programme
- 5) Measure and improve
 - Monitor through employee satisfaction / engagement surveys