



Strategic HR Review

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Patricia Bayerlein Rose Gailey, (2005), "The six principles of performance communication", Strategic HR Review, Vol. 4 Iss 4 pp. 32 - 35

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/14754390580000805>

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The six principles of performance communication

How effective HR and communication partnership creates true engagement

Increasingly, organizations are becoming aware that engaged employees are fundamental to achieving business success. Here, Patricia Bayerlein and Rose Gailey describe why alignment between HR and communication is at the heart of achieving true engagement and show how one company used their six principles to turn its performance around.

IN A RECENT CONVERSATION with an HR manager on the topic of employee engagement, we were surprised to hear resistance to the concept of using communication as a tool to reach employees, shift mindsets and drive performance. Joe, an experienced HR professional at a Fortune 500 manufacturer of automotive equipment that we'll call "AutoParts," had significant credibility and rapport throughout operations. When the VP of operations called in the communication team to help align all operations leaders in a new Global Manufacturing Council, Joe took offense. His expectation for the role of communication in engagement was just to "get the messages down in writing" and distribute the news.

We shared our position with Joe that communication is much more than reporting on the business: It's about thinking strategically about communication to drive engagement (see Figure 1, overleaf). So why all the confusion about the role of communication? Why do so many managers like Joe fail to leverage communication to drive engagement and high performance?

Winning "hearts and minds"

Many companies realize that the typical path to engaging the vast untapped middle of the workforce – raising compensation and benefits – will not be effective in today's workplace or in the workplace of the future. In fact, winning employees' hearts and minds involves a complex set of factors that define an employee's rational and emotional connection to work and the workplace. Studies on engagement examine company culture; trust in management; job fit and compatibility; relationships with managers, supervisors, and peers; open communication; opportunities for growth and challenging work; quality of workplace life; and overall compensation and benefits.

How can companies address all these factors? Leaders need to articulate the vision, live the company values and provide a line of sight to business goals. Managers and supervisors must prepare employees to meet the challenge of ongoing growth and organizational change. Supervisors must become the ultimate communicators and provide open and honest information on the organization's goals, policies, systems and practices.

Seamless alignment between HR and communication professionals is at the heart of implementing all the elements needed for true engagement. Clearly, HR plays an obvious role in engagement, yet often it is faced with the challenge of executing on a myriad of tactical and strategic deliverables. In our experience, results are even more powerful when an organization taps into what we refer to as performance communication principles.

Six performance communication principles

There are six basic principles designed to engage employees in a way that improves performance and

moves an organization closer to open communication (see sidebar, right).

The six principles approach (see Figure 2, overleaf) can form the foundation for an effective partnership between communication and HR. Using AutoParts as a case study, this article will demonstrate how this approach can move communications from fragmented to integrated and, ultimately, drive employee engagement.

Principle 1: Build communication as an integrated system connected to business strategy

The challenge for AutoParts – a company with 12,000 employees working in three countries – was to engage employees to take ownership for quality and costs. The workforce had been reduced dramatically, causing deep distrust in management and the company's future and quality at the most critical production facility was at an all-time low.

The communication team began by working with leaders and operations management to identify critical business issues and performance metrics. They conducted qualitative and quantitative research based on political opinion polling to identify factors behind poor employee performance. The research revealed employees knew what needed to be done to improve performance, but had little confidence that management would act on their recommendations. It showed employees still maintained tremendous pride in the company and brands that executives had let languish.

Corporate communication developed an integrated communication campaign to drive transformation at all levels of the company. The plan that emerged focused on articulating a clear vision and values for the company using high-touch leadership communication – including the annual leadership conference – to build management credibility and focus employees on business results. The plan aimed to revitalize the tarnished brand to reconnect employees with customers; recognize, measure and reward the behaviors emblematic of the new culture; and create an action-planning process employees could manage and own.

Principle 2: Provide clarity, information and inspiration

Principle 2 is about telling a compelling story to connect the rational and emotional components of employee engagement. Messages sent out to employees are one facet of this principle and must provide direction, clarity, simplicity, consistency, integration and, importantly, emotion.

At AutoParts, the team worked with executive leadership and plant management in small group and one-on-one sessions to integrate strategy, brand, vision and culture messages into a single story that could be told by everyone from the executive suite to the front-line supervisor. The aim was to provide clear, consistent direction for employees so they could act.



PERFORMANCE COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

1. Build communication as an integrated system connected to the business strategy.
2. Provide clarity, information and inspiration to connect heads, hands, hearts and minds.
3. Use communication as a leadership alignment tool.
4. Establish strategic communication competencies for leaders, managers and supervisors.
5. Analyze information flow to provide neutral, objective perspectives on critical issues.
6. Move faster than the speed of change.

To develop the story, corporate communication used a situational analysis of their employee audience to construct messages that motivated employees to take the right actions with a sense of commitment and urgency. The team evaluated the employee audiences using the independent and dependent variables of situational theory: interest/connection, problem recognition, constraint recognition and active and passive communication behavior. Through this analysis, the team was able to anticipate the communication needs of each segment – actively connected, aware and unconnected – and tailor the story in different ways to drive engagement. The ability to differentiate the story and the messages was critical to building momentum throughout the organization and reaching employees who were most resistant.

In addition, the communication team used the employee survey and brand research to pinpoint an essential element of employee engagement – pride in the company and the dependability and value of the product – which was incorporated into all communication around the brand and corporate culture. The brand became the rallying cry for the overarching change campaign that energized employees and drove companywide performance improvements.

Principle 3: Use communication as a leadership alignment tool

Communication can and should do more than tell a powerful story – it should drive alignment to create the story itself and make it an everyday reality. To create a powerful leadership presence in AutoParts, the corporate communication team developed a process whereby



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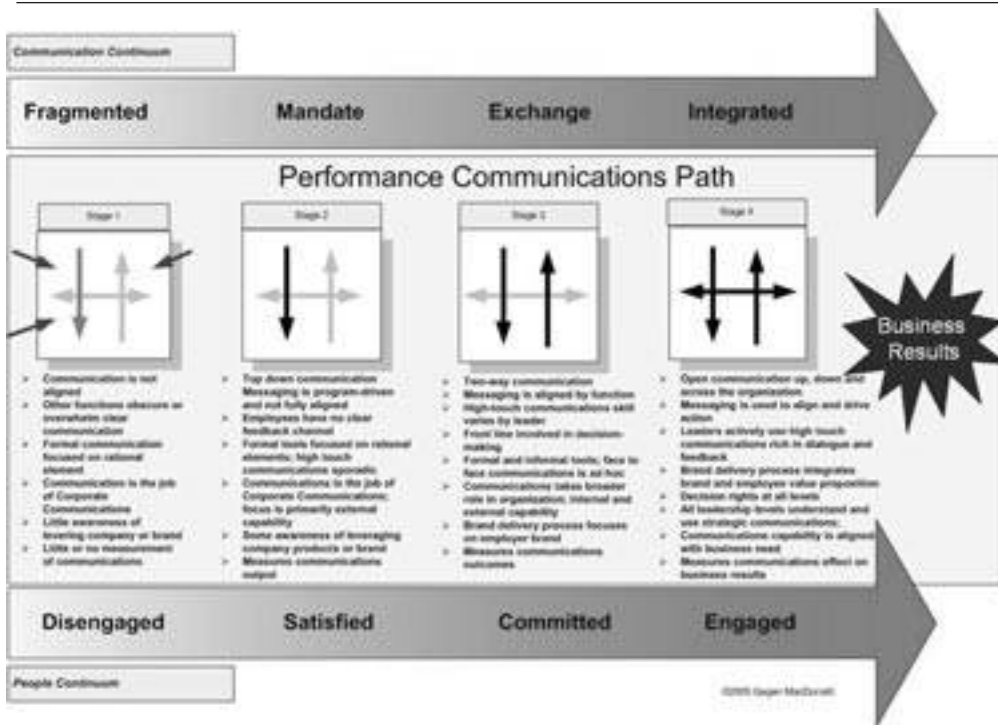
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Figure 1. Integrated communication drives employee engagement



managers from all over the organization were asked to look at the current culture in their operations and then articulate the desired culture. Part of the process was to identify the obstacles to change and metrics needed to assess progress toward transformation.

This process, although simple, helped managers see that the change necessary to transform the company and restore employees' passion for their work was in their hands, not the senior leaders'. As managers drew up their desired culture, the communication team developed a core platform of common elements that became the cornerstone of engaging employees and sharing the new way of thinking at the company. The team also worked with corporate headquarters to create a shared understanding of the metrics used to run the business, and conducted a survey to identify the soft features of the culture which drove the hard metrics of operational performance.

With a common language blending the rational and emotional, everyone was able to work toward the company's goal to become an industry leader. That goal, balanced with a single set of behaviors focused on delivering high-performance and creating a healthy corporate culture, was key to motivating employees.

Principle 4: Strategic communication competencies for leaders, managers and supervisors

Principle 4 seeks to enable an organization to build the fundamental competencies essential for open communication. In many companies, open communication is identified as a value but it has little connection to the day-to-day communication styles of senior leaders, managers or supervisors.

At AutoParts, corporate communication partnered with HR to identify core strategic communication competencies critical to building trust, credibility and respect. The learning process helped individual managers and supervisors to articulate the vision and tell the story connected to the performance metrics for their own business unit and the company. The process also trained employees to use their interactions with customers, suppliers and other key stakeholders to tell the company story and revitalize and build its reputation at every touchpoint.

Principle 5: Analyze information flow to provide objective perspectives

Principle 5 focuses on the importance of finding the root causes of poor communication. At AutoParts, the communication team found that even though excellent project management

systems, tools and reporting structures were in place, levels of understanding within project teams varied so greatly they caused several barriers to sharing information. Employees in various cross-border operations struggled with cultural issues such as differing attitudes toward decision making and relationship building. Addressing language issues and conducting cross-cultural training would only be one part of the solution. Front-line employees and supervisors needed to shift their mindset and behavior around sharing information.

Over three months, the corporate communication team worked with operations to identify critical information-flow barriers and develop a plan to address each issue. Communicators developed and facilitated a three-step problem-solving process for operations teams to define communication behaviors and expectations and create the dialogue necessary to engage employees in removing information-flow barriers.

As the flow of information across the organization improved, employees quickly identified the potential for significant cost savings. Examining and improving information flow led to better first-time product quality, productivity, efficiency and delivery, as well as increased credibility with customers and greater trust among employees.

Principle 6: Move faster than the speed of change

Principle 6 is about using communication to understand and manage change. It ensures employees are primed to respond in a productive way. During significant change, employees are looking for some say over their jobs, a line of sight to the end goal; information regarding what will change; new relationships to help them manage the

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transition; and a change of pace that can provide new challenges. Using communication to address these fundamental elements of change theory can make the difference in ensuring employees stay with the company and deliver positive results.

The turnaround at AutoParts was led by a proactive communication team that used performance communication to show employees that the company and management cared. They worked with leaders to tell the truth about the business reality and impending change – even when those truths included plant closures and layoffs. They created a culture team of opinion leaders and high-potential employees to help build a compelling vision for the future and sustain the momentum of culture change.

Communication worked to develop a process that helped leaders live one of the company's most important drivers of employee engagement: respect for people. They combed through employee survey results and uncovered the fact that employees needed to see respect in action at all levels before they could truly take steps to focus on the customer. A high-touch, face-to-face program was introduced. It got senior executives out in the field and walking the assembly line to talk with employees about tough business issues and make respect visible. They also worked with HR to establish a series of culture transformation workshops for all employees to enable the workforce to embrace change.

These actions, along with many others, formed a comprehensive campaign that resulted in increased survey scores around respect from 20 to 60 percent, and engagement from 30 to 55 percent in approximately three years. The result was a landmark contract with the union benchmarked by many leading companies and a workforce that was able to better work with managers and supervisors to improve first time quality and reduce defects.

Performance communication drives results

After talking with Joe, our HR colleague, about the principles of performance communication, he recognized how developing a partnership with communication could help the company's Manufacturing Council. He recognized that each operation had a different view on root causes of cost challenges, and each plant was at a different point on the engagement spectrum. He understood that the skill of the communication team was required to paint a unified and compelling vision for operations and to connect that vision with a line of sight for employees. Together, HR and communication blended the fundamental tenets of team development with effective one-on-one communication to create a vision of an operation where everyone owns cost and quality.

Using performance communication principles, the HR and communication team was able to engage operations employees – over 12,000 people in three

Figure 2. Taking a performance communication approach

Principle	Action Points
1. Build communication as an integrated system connected to the business strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify key company initiatives that require strategic communication planning Use a cross-functional approach to ensure opportunities and risks are clearly identified and connected with communication strategies Develop "line of sight" connecting employees and their contributions to the organization Balance global and local needs Develop metrics to create a more proactive communication process and connection to business performance
2. Provide clarity, information and inspiration to connect heads, hands, hearts and minds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build rational and emotional connections Articulate the vision and business goals to tell a compelling, overarching story Explain to employees what you really want them to do Provide them with the information to make the right decision Help employees understand why they should care
3. Use communication as a leadership alignment tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders examine the current culture and articulate the desired culture Identify obstacles to change and metrics to gauge progress Create a shared understanding of metrics and link culture to hard business metrics Create a common language blending the rational and emotional drivers of engagement
4. Establish strategic communication competencies for leaders, managers and supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and measure strategic communication behaviors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivates and inspires Creates meaning Articulates a vision Develops trust Practices open communication Exercises influence Uses symbols and symbolic behavior Train leaders at all levels to tell the story and connect rational and emotional touchpoints
5. Analyze information flow to provide neutral, objective perspectives on critical issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build dialogue and feedback mechanisms Facilitate communication on cross-functional teams and increase involvement Identify and measure knowledge-sharing gaps Enable the sharing of accurate information
6. Move faster than the speed of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prime employees to respond to change in a productive manner Develop an integrated campaign that addresses each audience across stages of change Communicate what's critical as soon as you know it—if you can't share critical information, at least let employees know why and when they'll find out Develop high-touch communication skills for leaders at all levels and arm them with the story

countries – to take ownership of cost and quality. The results were astounding. Over a period of nine months, projected cost-savings reached US\$145 million: US\$90 million over initial projections. First-time quality improved from 54 to 90 percent and cost per unit was reduced by 40 percent. The HR manager reflected back on his initial defensiveness – he had limited his own view of communication to a function competing for employee attention. In retrospect, he realized that employee engagement was not an either/or choice between HR and communication – it required the balance of both functions to harness the arts of communication and teamwork to create true passion.



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