Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Strategy

Published 9 June 2021 - ID G00746709 - 6 min read

By Analysts Heather Colella, Irving Tyler

Initiatives: CIO Role Evolution; Executive Leadership: Internal Communications

Great communication inspires action and commitment and leads to better business outcomes. To deliver great IT communications, CIOs must build a strong communications core, starting with a strategy for effective communications.

Overview

Key Findings

- Measurable business value is associated with effective communications. Yet effective communications is often undervalued as a tool, because it is a skill used daily, often without forethought and understanding of its power.

- CIOs and IT leaders do not have a reputation as great communicators, because more often than not, their roles evolved from an engineering base, where technical speak was valued more than business speak.

- Communication is essential to leadership effectiveness. Yet this discrete skill set is rarely formalized, because communicating is considered commonplace and, therefore, not in need of explicit definition and documentation.

Recommendations

CIOs seeking to improve the effectiveness of IT’s communications:

- Create a sense of urgency for improving internal communications. Educate others on the correlation between communications effectiveness, organizational turnover and financial performance.

- Adopt a strategy for effective communications, and consistently apply the strategy before, during and after each interaction. As a first step, determine what you want to accomplish and with whom.

- Hone communication skills for clarity and understanding by refining a series of tips into daily habits. Effective communications is a core leadership competency, and some level of proficiency should be required at all levels of management.
**Introduction**

This research is part of a series on effective communications for the CIO and IT organization. This series presents the strategy benefits of, and strategy for, ongoing communications:

- Effective Communications: Stakeholder Analysis
- Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Plan

It pays to invest in effective communications. A Willis Towers Watson ROI study on effective communications found a correlation between communications effectiveness, organizational turnover and financial performance:

> “Companies with highly effective internal communication strategies are 3.5 times more likely to outperform their industry peers than organisations that do not effectively communicate internally.”

> “98% of highly successful organisations state they understand what key messages resonate with their top-performing employees. Only 42% of less successful organisations could claim the same.”

> “93% of highly effective and successful organisations state that they have a clear understanding of what messages resonate with new employees, whereas only 48% of less effective organisations could say the same.”

IT must be in constant interaction with multiple teams across the enterprise to define needs and solve problems collaboratively. If CIOs and IT leaders can intentionally improve communications, they can produce better results and accelerate time to value.

**Analysis**

**Apply the Components of an Effective Communications Strategy to Improve Business Outcomes**

An effective communications strategy is an ongoing process that requires consistent practice and discipline.

Start with the end in mind, using the Know, Feel, Do structure to guide you:

- **Know:** What is the one thing that you want people to know, think, believe or understand?
- **Feel:** How do you want people to feel because of your communication?
- **Do:** What do you want people to do as a direct result of your communication? Think in terms of success for the IT organization.
As an example, for many CIOs, the “end in mind” is to have IT viewed as a source of value and business capability.

The ongoing process for an effective communications strategy is shown in Figure 1.

**Ongoing Process to Develop an Effective Communications Strategy**

1. **Define success.** Start with the end in mind. Ask, “What does IT need to accomplish?” Or to help focus the answer, ask, “In one year’s time, when we look back, what will IT have accomplished, and how will we be perceived by our stakeholder audience?”

2. **Identify stakeholders.** After identifying what needs to be accomplished, ask, “With whom?” Use the Know, Feel, Do structure as you consider your audience. See Effective Communications: Stakeholder Analysis to perform an in-depth stakeholder analysis. Keep in mind that, at the executive level, a more strategic message resonates more. And at operational levels, more tactical and concrete messages will
achieve better results, particularly when they answer the question, “What is in it for me?” Avoid using technical jargon, and instead, speak the language that business stakeholders will understand.

3. **Craft and deliver messages.** A great vision uses storytelling to provide context for delivering every communication. A great story links business capabilities to business outcomes and reinforces how stakeholder engagement directly contributes to those results. Supplement the adage, “A picture is worth 1,000 words,” with the idea that, “A metaphor is worth 1,000 pictures.” See *The Art of Creating a One-Page Strategy* to develop your story. A great communicator matches the depth and details of the message to specific stakeholders to facilitate learning in a way that is best-suited to them. Adopt a fact-based approach to message construction. A message based on facts helps defuse emotion and encourages objectivity.

4. **Measure success.** Measure the effectiveness of your communications strategy by engaging your leadership team in a frank conversation. Explore the following questions:

- What examples do we have of successful communications? How do we know that they were successful?
- What are examples of unsuccessful communications? What did not work? How do we know?
- Who are the top stakeholders with whom we need to improve communications? Where should we focus our efforts? Why?

To achieve effective communications, apply a combination of formal and informal methods to help ensure that the message has been effectively received and desired results achieved.

5. **Adjust as required.** Use what is learned to inform how the process will be optimized. The iterative nature of a communications strategy is what creates the foundation for excellence, and maximizes impact and where excellence is achieved. Adopt what works, and abandon what does not.

**Hone Your Communication Skills With These Tips**

Communication is a core leadership competency that balances speaking, listening and facilitating. In great leaders, these skills come together as they engage their organizations in a journey toward ongoing success. Those sensitive to their audiences use what they learn to refine their vision and message and approach.

Speakers who are most impactful are recognized for their exceptional delivery skills. One speaker may not have the best delivery and still be a great communicator, because the message is so compelling. Or another speaker can have a less-than-compelling message and be great at delivery and still win approval. Take advantage of every opportunity to hone the message and approach to become great over time. Increase your communication effectiveness by applying these top practices:
Establish solid relationships within the enterprise as an ongoing effort. Do not wait for a crisis to begin communicating, because there will be more questions about who you are and what you represent, than about the content of the message you are trying to communicate.

Adjust your communication style to the vantage point of the executive and the culture of the organization. Does the CEO support the CIO in a leadership role? Do the lines of business support the CIO in a business role? Understanding where the organization is today will help you chart the path to communication effectiveness.

Develop your communication style. To develop your skills, take speaking classes, consult a communications coach and participate in formal and informal programs. Look for opportunities to practice, and refine your skills by presenting at every opportunity.

Make it personal. Weave in personal stories and experiences to demonstrate important points, while making the message more engaging and memorable. Communicating in a way that people can relate to will help gain their buy-in for the message.

Invest time prior to each interaction to ensure greater success — and practice, practice, practice!

Effective communications has the ability to deliver concrete business results. Those results start by adopting a strategy for effective communications that considers the outcome desired and the stakeholders impacted.

Evidence
1 Towers Watson Research Study on Effective Communication and ROI, Bizcommunity.com

Document Revision History
Effective Communications: A Strategy - 17 August 2009

Recommended by the Authors
Communications Score
How to Create a Persuasive Pitch That Attracts Interest and Investment
Improve Your Team's Communications Measurement: Quick Wins
The Art of Creating a One-Page Strategy