



Public Sector Reform Column



STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

We live in an organised society whereby people depend on organisations for a living. Whether organisations operate within the public or private sector, they all share a common denominator. They all communicate at every level and have communication at their core. It is probably one element of an organisation that is often taken for granted, because communication takes place in so many ways and so frequently. More often, we do not consciously realise that we are communicating and more importantly how we are communicating. Some people have mastered the art of communicating, but there are several instances where organisational goals were not achieved because of poor communication.

Strategic communications is “people-centred” and is the process of providing information with the aim of achieving a shared meaning based on organisational values and principles, such as trust, honesty, timeliness, and empathy. The fundamental purpose of strategic communications in an organisation is to enable and energise employees to carry out its strategic intent. It provides the capability to rapidly identify, send, receive and understand strategic information that is credible, sensible, and relevant.

Communication at Work

Communication is one of the most critical elements of any organisation’s functioning. We spend 50 to 80% of our time communicating. What is communicated and how it is communicated can either inhibit or encourage an organisation’s performance. Each year, millions of dollars are spent across the globe on marketing and public relations specialists to produce communications plans and glossy publication material to convey messages to customers and stakeholders. This follows a positive understanding of the importance of strategic communication that results in more income to the private sector, better public relations and better use of government’s services through customer information in the public sector.

Neglected Strategies

Much emphasis is placed on the development of strategic and organisational plans and reviews to guide decision-makers and users of information. Proper planning allows an organisation to know what direction it is going to take and how it is going to get there. Strategic planning helps to coordinate resources for maximum effectiveness and efficiency. There is now a growing trend to detail the communication methods directed at informing customers and stakeholders about business. Unfortunately, too many organisations place very little or even no emphasis at all on internal communications. Very rarely is the matter of strategic internal communications given the same priority as its highly visible counterpart. It remains a mystery why external communication appears to take priority, but there is no question that successful strategic internal communication planning is a proactive approach to building a better, focused and efficient workforce.

Poor Business Practices

Some organisations are criticised for only communicating to staff during times of crisis, layoffs, downsizing and technological change. Determining what should be communicated to staff, when and how it should be communicated is often done on an ad hoc basis. This results in internal communication being developed reactively. Once the crisis or major event is over, communication tends to go back to being an unorganised incoherent process.

Cultural Change

Successful organisations create workforces that understand missions, goals, values and procedures and responsibilities. Virgin Atlantic Airlines have succeeded in doing this. On a recent trip to the U.K., personal observations indicated that Virgin Atlantic staff appeared to share a particular trait. This trait was visible in the way they served their travelers from the time they stepped into the check-in line through to arriving at their final destination. These kinds of organisations have succeeded in finding ways to create organisational cultures that most employees hold in common. These employees are motivated and focused to provide information and services with the aim of achieving a shared meaning. This type of culture is probably the easiest thing to comprehend, but the most difficult to define, because like many developmental

and reform initiatives, this involves changing mind-sets and attitudes that have existed for decades.

The desired cultural change is not about controlling employees, but to direct them towards common goals that they can act upon everyday in a coherent coordinated manner. The what's, how's and why's are clarified and the shared culture allows employees to be empowered when performing their duties and responsibilities.

A New Approach

The Office of Public Sector Reform is embarking on the development of Communications Strategies for Government Departments to complement its core services. It is envisaged that these strategies will help departments and agencies to ensure that all communications are well coordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the diverse needs of the public in a positive, constructive manner. Internally, such strategies will conduct and support effective communications to inform staff of news and developments about programmes, services, initiatives and other policies through the available channels. The use of email and intranets are becoming popular as opposed to written memos or the "office grapevine." Employers also have the opportunity to communicate relevant information during team addresses, training sessions, one-to-ones and appraisals. Good internal communication between employers and employees makes good business sense. It is important to keep all employees in a workplace happy and contented. Externally, customers are serviced by well-informed, confident staff members who are better equipped to serve. In addition, customers can expect to receive an acceptable level of service delivery across the board, no matter which individual serves them.

The Way Forward

If an organisation wants to show its commitment to its employees and its customers, it needs to have a Communications Policy which its employees and customers are aware of, understand and support. It is time to use common culture in the workplace as a strategic advantage, by creating the culture through the use of strategic, coordinated communication strategies in a consistent manner. Strategic communications planning is long term and proactive, but before one can embark on creating such an environment, one must be clear on what sort of workplace it is

attempting to create and what values, principles and procedures need to be set up so that the envisaged workplace can thrive. It is not merely about creating a vision and mission statement and placing it on every notice board and door. This approach is sure to fail in the short run. One must consider if the behaviour of managers and the decisions made utilise “*real communications tools.*” If they do not, this can result in the formal communication saying one thing, whilst decision making and actions give a conflicting message, making way for bad feelings between management and staff and organisation and customers.

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