
communicating to drive culture change

A sound, strategic communication and engagement plan, led from the top and guided by a Communications Culture Action Team, can greatly influence behaviors and drive successful culture change.

Conversely, ineffective, inadequate, poorly conceived and poorly timed communications can actually create resistance to change.

This article provides Senn Delaney's best practices in guiding organizations to create communications action plans and a strategic plan for communicating culture change that engages employees at all levels of the organization.



HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

Communication is a primary driver of behavior change. Here are some guiding principles for a CEO-led communications plan that will inspire and motivate people to make the desired changes in behaviors needed to shift an organization and improve performance.

1) Leaders cast influencing shadows in all forms of communication

How often have we seen CEOs stand at a lectern at a company-wide meeting and make a passionate case about need to change, improve, grow, get better? They make a strong and compelling case, complete with a slide presentation filled with graphics with arrows pointing up and down. They talk about competitive advantage, market share, profitability — all key things that CEOs focus on — and then declare that everyone will need to step up, be more accountable and change what they do. End speech, exit left.

People shift uncomfortably in their seats and nod a lot, but secretly they hope that the speech is nothing more than that, and that they can get back to doing what they've always done.

This may sound like an archaic approach, but this top-down, one-way communication style is still more the norm than the exception, and one of the main reasons why most change efforts founder. Leaders who are able to successfully lead organizational transformation understand this fundamental change principle:

Creating change inside organizations is not a process or event, it's an ongoing journey that requires changing human

behavior and thinking.

To lead the cultural transformation of an organization, the CEO must have an unrelenting focus on purposeful leadership, broad engagement with energy, momentum and mass, and aligning institutional practices, systems and capabilities. Because cultures resist what they need the most, the CEO also should play the starring communications role in this effort.

Robert Mai and Alan Akerson emphasize the importance of this role in their book, *The Leader as Communicator*: "Above all, leadership communication entails nurturing and maintaining a workplace environment in which communication flows freely and quickly in all directions with minimal distortion or lag time. The leader of an organization is automatically the designated chief communication officer and is accountable for all communication in the organization — not only his or her own, but that of the entire workplace community."

The message and vision must come from the top, and be reinforced in every formal and informal communication because leaders cast powerful, influencing shadows. They must set the example, putting the key drivers of the desired culture in place and in use.

All modes of internal communication, such as employee publications, multimedia communication campaigns and even in-house training programs should introduce, explain and support the desired change. But it is only when the CEO and top leaders become the change they want to see in the organization will anybody else believe the change message.

A CEO of a massive insurance company that is continually working on keeping its top-rated customer-centric culture at the forefront, describes his job this way: "I see myself as the Chief Culture Officer. My leadership shadow sets the tone for the culture. I am the one person in the

company who is fully accountable for the entire company to the board of directors, to the members, and to all of the employees. We've invested in having all of our employees attend culture-shaping workshops that help them get insights on how they shape the culture both from an individual and teaming perspective. It's also afforded us the advantage of having a common language related to our culture. I have monthly employee meetings where I reinforce and showcase our principles."

2) Make a compelling case for change, and emphasize the positive

The CEO must provide a compelling case for change that helps people to understand the purpose or reason for shaping their culture in a way that they can personally connect with and relate to. They need to be clear on the behavioral "from and to" of the journey. Research has shown that communicating the need to change by focusing on what's wrong creates an environment of blame and causes anxiety and resistance. Leaders who have successfully shifted their cultures communicate the need for change in a positive way, encouraging employees to build on success and inspiring people to believe they have the ability to change.

Those leaders who have defined a clear, compelling purpose for the organization and themselves, and who can articulate that vision in an authentic, personal way in every formal and informal interaction, will experience a greater level of buy-in and engagement, which in turn, improves performance.

3) Use both a content-driven and rapport-driven approach

Successful communications that engage and energize the entire organization employ both an "outside-in" and "inside-out" approach. The outside-in method is more intellectual, designed to share information. People are informed through a content-driven, top-down, one-way communication about a decision that **4)**

Begin a communications plan quickly and never stop communicating key messages and success stories

When to start communicating about changing your culture is just as important as the messages and stories of change that will shape your employees' experience and increase adoption of the new culture. One prominent university president began articulating his vision just days after he returned for his second term as president, and he continued to be a strong presence in driving and communicating change across the university during his tenure.

In the absence of clear communications about the culture change from the CEO and divisional leaders, people tend to suffer from what we call MSU Syndrome: making stuff up. Early communication is critical to prevent misinformation and rumors, which cause anxiety, negative attitudes, lowered trust and resistance. This consumes valuable time and negatively affects performance.

This happened at a large retail company when the CEO waited eight months to announce the company culture-shaping initiative at a national sales conference even though the process had already been introduced to hundreds of senior leaders.

The CEO stood up at the meeting and spoke about why and how the company needed to change, but by then, it was too late. Through the company grapevine, people who had not yet been through the culture-shaping experience had already made up their own messages about what the program was really all about. Some labeled the initiative as a two-day training that you have to endure. Other skeptics dismissed it as nonsense.

As a result, Senn Delaney and the senior team had to work extra hard to get people to see value, make the connection to the business need and embrace change.

is your communication strategy effective in changing behavior?

Determine how effective your strategic communications and engagement plan is by considering the following questions.

1 Senior leaders are fully involved in shaping and conveying key messages about the change initiative.

yes needs improvement no

2 Leaders have defined a clear, compelling purpose for the organization and themselves, and can articulate that vision in an authentic, personal way.

yes needs improvement no

3 Our communication for change focuses on encouraging employees to build on success, rather than on fixing what is not working well.

yes needs improvement no

4 Communications are not just informational, but use a rapport-driven, two-way, inside-out approach.

yes needs improvement no

5 We have created a strategic communications plan to support our goals and have provided the resources to implement it.

yes needs improvement no

6 Communicators have experienced our culture-shaping process first-hand to communicate from a deeply engaged perspective.

yes needs improvement no

7 We use personal stories to demonstrate the shift in behaviors that are making a difference.

yes needs improvement no

8 Our leaders understand the importance of communicating consistent messages and how to "show not tell" to engage people.

yes needs improvement no

9 We continually measure the effectiveness of communications.

yes needs improvement no

Before beginning communication about the cultural shift, a strategic communication plan should be developed to serve as a roadmap to articulate how, when, why, and what you are going to communicate, and to which audiences about the culture-change vision and plan for achieving the desired culture shift.

That plan should be carefully thought through so that communications are in line and in step with all the other things involved in the transformational change. Saying too much, too soon can have an unintended negative impact. For example, communicating the need for change before you devise a cultural roadmap to support your vision may cause unnecessary anxiety and resistance.

5) Form a Communications Culture Action Team

We recommend setting up culture action teams very early in the process to oversee four critical areas of the culture-change initiative: communication, measurement, reinforcement and recognition, education and human resources. Because communication should not only convey information but also influence behavior and thinking, a Communications Culture Action Team will be an important driver of culture change.

This team should have an executive sponsor and a director-level day-to-day manager. Members should be a visible group of senior leaders and others, who get it, do it and communicate it in actions and words to ensure the desired culture is in use. Members of this team don't all have to be communications experts, but they should be able to listen, guide and direct, and draw upon their knowledge and experience about what does and doesn't work.

The team should meet regularly to identify issues, discover, innovate and share best practices, support and coach each other and recommend next steps. Include culture-shaping experts from outside the organization as members of your

Communications Culture Action Team. They will be effective partners in guiding the team and coaching members to address issues and overcome barriers based on their expertise and best practices in the field.

6) Empower communicators by having them experience the culture-shaping process

Changing the culture is a significant, long-term shift in the way the company and people within it work and think. This effort will not be completely successful without effective communication, and effective communication depends on an experienced connection to and understanding of the important role culture plays in any change program.

Any company's head of internal communications and the communications team members play a pivotal role in informing and engaging your workforce. In effect, they become change champions.

This is an important role because they must work closely with the CEO, senior leadership team, business units, divisional leaders and human resources partners. They not only create many forms of formal company communications, they also guide leaders across the organization on how to communicate key messages and "show up" to direct reports, division or teams in everything from meetings to daily business interactions.

Communicators should be included as partners with the senior team from the very beginning in order to be clear on specific objectives the communications plan should accomplish, and to create the communications strategy.

So, it also holds that the people charged with communicating to the company about your culture-change initiative also need to personally experience the unfreezing process to be able to write or talk about it from a more deeply engaged level. By participating in the process, they

will be grounded in the principles, gain personal insights that connect to the purpose of the culture change, and be better able to understand and articulate from a broader perspective what it all means.

7) Provide ongoing support and resources needed to engage broadly and sustain change

A methodical, comprehensive and integrated approach is needed to successfully shift a company's culture from top to bottom. This doesn't happen overnight.

There needs to be a sustained commitment to driving the culture deeply into the organization and sustaining the positive changes. Communications, reinforcements and applications are needed to continually reinforce the culture, align systems, processes and performance programs to it and measure progress.

Through all this, the communications team needs full support from the CEO and senior executive team as well as the resources to create and execute a strategic communications plan. The plan should support several strategies, including:

- tell personal success stories across multiple platforms to demonstrate the kind of culture you are seeking to instill
- develop communicators into culture "brand facilitators" to provide consistent messaging and serve as culture champions within their divisions and units
- support the efforts of reinforcement and recognition programs and celebrate milestones and successes
- encourage and demonstrate to leaders how to communicate through actions and example; show, don't tell

Companies we have worked with most successfully on transforming their cultures are committed to sustaining that change through the best practices described in this article. They have long-term strategic plans that support the culture and place

a high importance on communicating to engage and inspire people to make the culture a way of life.

The following interview with Karen Patterson, assistant vice president of internal communications at The Ohio State University, demonstrates a successful multi-pronged communications approach to supporting culture transformation.

Q: What is the Communication Culture Action Team's purpose?

The team's purpose is to guide and align all communications about the Excellence to Eminence initiative. The goal is to ensure that everyone clearly understands the need to transform the culture to one university, and the nature and depth of this commitment.

Q: How important is the communications and engagement strategy in supporting OSU's transformational journey?

A multi-pronged communication plan is critical to actively engage staff, faculty, and leadership to foster trust and respect, and to promote desired behaviors and values. The strategy helps us align and implement our plan in support of our vision and desired outcomes.

Q: What are the goals of your communications to support OSU's strategic roadmap to success?

Senn Delaney helped guide the Communications Culture Action Team in creating our communications and engagement plan. The overarching goal is to provide the communication strategy, systems, infrastructure, means and media to shift Ohio State stakeholders' behavior that will contribute to moving the institution from Excellence to Eminence.

We are focused on demonstrating the link between values-based behaviors and goals, and instilling a culture that recognizes and rewards positive performance. This involves telling stories across multiple

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platforms to demonstrate the kind of culture we want to achieve. It includes encouraging leaders across campus to lead by example. It means recognizing and celebrating success across campuses both formally and informally at all levels.

Q Why did you create the Excellence to Eminence Web site?

It provides that very visible — and tangible — proof that the university is behind this endeavor 100 percent. It also provides a showcase for the president's vision, the case for building a high-performance culture and what success looks like. It supports our goals of creating an environment that encourages a culture of collaboration and innovation. It is an easy, accessible way to leverage information and share stories of faculty and staff making a difference. Finally, as it becomes interactive in the near future, it will give everyone a chance to participate in the process.

Q: Why is experiencing the culture-shaping process important for communicators?

Because they are the ones who will bring this to life in their units. That is where going through the unfreezing experience really makes a difference.

You can very dispassionately talk about an Unfreezing retreat even if you've never participated in one. However, the culture-shaping principles and concepts

come to life when you experience them. You gain personal insights and a greater understanding of different leadership styles and behaviors. You begin to see where you can make a difference in the process.

When I was going through the Unfreezing culture-shaping session, my first thought was, 'How am I going to describe this to faculty?' It helped me to focus on the outcome, not on the event itself. It also gave me perspective on the subject of relevance: Why will this be important to our faculty and staff?

Q Where are you at in executing the communications strategy?

The strategy was created last June, and we plan to refresh it this summer. I believe we still are in our infancy in terms of communicating and have distance to cover before Excellence to Eminence becomes part of the university's fabric. I think we have a really good plan put together, but cannot say we've developed any best practices just yet.

We have a fairly robust and seasoned set of communication vehicles, but like all communications specialists, we are looking at ways to use social media. Our first strategy was to create a leadership communication and engagement plan that supports aligning all significant university initiatives as a step toward eminence. The outcome is that leaders will exemplify their roles as culture champions and their personal commitment to the process.

Q How important is having the culture championed by the president?

We have a leader who is firmly committed to this and we want to take advantage of that. We are fortunate that people genuinely want to do what the president asks of them.

Universities, unlike corporations, are different creatures. Our faculty are very independent, and we have to be careful

about how we position this shift. While it is important that this is championed by the president, it is equally important that faculty see themselves contributing to this effort. An editorial by the president in the university's newspaper was instrumental in launching this effort because it really grounded the work we are trying to accomplish. But now we need the faculty also to help carry the message.

Q How important are success stories in helping change behaviors and gain acceptance?

I think it's important to share compelling success stories of how people across the organization have applied principles learned in the Unfreezing retreats to change the way they work. These insights will help motivate faculty and staff to make a difference, and will create tangible success stories.

Hopefully, this will translate into opportunities from making a difference within their own units. We have 23,000 faculty and staff, and feel we have 23,000 stories we can tell. So, we are watching for those stories that embody our values and that "show rather than tell."

Q Your multi-pronged approach includes a grassroots element. Can you explain why that is important and how it works?

Unfreezing retreats are just the first step on this journey. This is a big place, and it will take a lot of communications in the right mediums to the right audiences to keep our momentum and keep this culture-shaping journey alive. The old adage is true that you have to tell something seven times in seven mediums.

We recognized that our president can't be in every college or unit-level meeting, so our next strategy will be to enlist the deans, vice presidents and other people to whom faculty and staff turn on a daily basis for leadership.

Fortunately, we were able to hire some-

"We are seeking to create communications champions in each of our colleges, and developing these college communicators into champions is part of that grassroots effort."

one whose whole job is to write about, look for and maintain culture-shaping communications. She has just created several tools and placed them in a leadership toolkit that will help maintain the grassroots efforts. Leaders won't have to create the communication vehicles to foster a discussion because we've done that for them.

Additionally, we have a group of communicators across every college that we can enlist. Last summer, those individuals went through the two-day Unfreezing retreat to prepare them for the 'asks' we plan to make.

We are seeking to create communications champions in each of our colleges, and developing these college communicators into champions is part of that grassroots effort. They will be the eyes and ears and hands in the colleges to help their deans who are the local leaders.

Also, our newly hired communications coordinator is developing relationships with them to capture those success stories we spoke about earlier.

Q How are the culture-shaping principles being reinforced through communication in daily situations?

We have a wonderful example of this on campus. Our athletics director has a 15-minute period of coaching and feedback at the end of each of his senior staff

meetings. It's a powerful example, especially because Ohio State's athletics program is so very visible and very popular.

Additionally, many of our college communicators work side by side with their deans and VPs, and help the deans with reminders and meeting starters to connect people to the concepts and keep the movement alive.

The next assignment for our culture communications coordinator is to create a toolkit for communicators that would include guided discussions, thank you letters, an invitation letter to a retreat, sample appreciation feedback ... anything a communicator can use to help a leader to be more effective in the reinforcement process.

Q What are the communications plans going forward?

We plan to make our Excellence to Eminence Web site more visible to faculty and staff. While we have 1,300 to 1,400 people who have gone through the unfreezing sessions, there are still more than 20,000 who haven't. That creates a disconnect because a small number of people are speaking this language that others don't yet understand.

The Excellence to Eminence Web site will help make that connection by serving as a bridge. It is designed to provide news and updates about what we're doing and also share success stories. We'll weave some culture-shaping language throughout so that we can begin to introduce concepts that are learned in the retreats.

We will also launch a recognition and reinforcement program. It will help those who haven't been through the process to see that the university is serious about acknowledging and rewarding behavior changes that support the values. They'll start to realize that if they live these values, they will be recognized. That is powerful. ■

about Senn Delaney

Senn Delaney is the culture-shaping firm of Heidrick & Struggles International, Inc., the premier provider of Executive Search, Culture Shaping and Leadership Consulting services worldwide.

Founded in 1978, Senn Delaney was the first firm in the world to focus exclusively on transforming cultures, essentially creating the corporate culture consulting industry. A singular mission of creating healthy, high-performance cultures has made us the leading international authority and successful practitioner of culture shaping that enhances the spirit and performance of organizations.

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