

Communicators key in critical business connections

By Christie Gay



Vice-president of Connections. Connections Consultant. Director of Internal Connections. It's conceivable that these could be the titles for communication professionals in the future.

As we all know, our profession is changing dramatically. Some of the roles that we have performed in the past such as crafter and drafter, editor and gatekeeper do not seem as critical to many as they once were. While we still may often fight for the importance of just the right language in our profession, the advent of social media, the pace and informality with which we communicate, and the slang that has become acceptable through electronic media have lowered the expectation and even the importance of the prose that we once held so dear. With blogs, team rooms and the various forays

into social media, anyone truly can communicate with just about anyone any time. The concept of a gatekeeper controlling who hears what and when is becoming extinct.

The role of the communicator has definitely changed — and it's proving to be much more exciting. Often the greatest value we can offer to our organizations is to become the facilitator of the connections that are necessary for business success. People are moving quickly, organizations are growing more global and complex, functions are becoming more siloed, technology is moving at the speed of a fast-paced roller coaster, and generations are having more and more difficulty understanding each other. The communication professional sits at the center of all of this. The communicator can play a critical role in connecting all of these factions in a way that creates a more highly engaged workforce and improves business results.

Let's take a look at some of the connections where we can use our energy to have a significant impact on the success of our organizations. Most organizations could improve the connections between:

- **Employees and the business strategy** – As you look at the results of engagement surveys, it is common to see a response below 70% on the question that asks if employees understand the role they play in delivering on the business strategy. In many organizations, the discussion on the business strategy stays at the top of the house or doesn't reach the organization below the manager. When an orchestra sits down to play a concerto, every single musician has a



complete score in front of them and knows their part well. If not, the end result would not be so pleasing to the ear. It would be interesting to set our organizations to music and see just how well we all play in concert. When alignment becomes music to our ears, our organizations win in the marketplace.

To truly connect people with the business strategy requires creativity, passion and knowledge. We want to win the hearts, minds *and* hands of the people in our organization, and communication professionals can play a key role in making this happen!

- **Leaders and employees** – The Conference Board Research on Discontent in the Workplace clearly shows the link between leadership behavior and employee engagement and then extends the link from employee engagement to productivity. We know that the actions of our leaders have a strong impact on our associates and their commitment to our organizations. So what role can we as communicators play? We are seeing many organizations run leadership alignment sessions where leaders agree on the key messages and their role in delivering and modeling them. These sessions end with a say/do analysis where the key messages are put on one flip chart and the actions leaders will take are put on another flip chart. If leaders can't match the do with the say, that message is removed. Each leader then leaves the session with a personal action plan of those things they have committed to do. This can be a real start in helping leaders walk the talk and build trust in our organizations.
- **Managers and the organization** – We have said for years that people don't leave companies, they leave managers. Many organizations, such as Wachovia, are focusing on their managers and their ability to communicate through establishing communication competencies and accountabilities, providing opportunities for skill building and developing a website that supports managers by providing them tips and templates for specific situations. These types of initiatives can help change the managers' role from simply reading the PowerPoint we send them to really having a dialogue with their teams about the specific meaning of the corporate messages to them. The Melcrum Employee Engagement report shows that only 68% rated the communication performance of their organizations average, 11% rated it good and no one rated it very good. We still have work to do, but there are a great number of success stories to pave the way.
- **Cross-functional business and support groups** – "We have silos" is a frequent declaration in many of our organizations. People are so busy and moving so fast, that it's hard enough to communicate up and down, let alone look across! Communication professionals can help facilitate that. A medical device company created a cross-functional team that clearly articulated the work they do together and the information they need from each other to do that work better. Then they developed a process and made a commitment to share that information on a continuing basis and have periodic check-ins to see what's working and what's not. It was a communication professional who brought these groups together and facilitated this solution. The silos are turning into corn cribs in this organization!
- **Generations in the workforce** – In a conversation with an attorney last month, he said that new graduates just "aren't like we were." He talked about how they want to make partner but they aren't in a hurry to do it, and how they aren't willing to work the long hours. I looked at him and said, "You think they're wrong, don't you?" and he got quite a surprised look on his face. I asked if these Generation Y workers



perhaps watched their workaholic boomer parents and decided not to live that way. Just as the boomers watched their parents who struggled through the Depression and said, "I'll make sure I don't go through that." As communication professionals, one of the most critical roles we play is to help generations learn to understand and communicate with each other without judgment.

- **Cultures around the world** – While much has been written on the subject, *Riding the Waves of Culture* by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden Turner still stands as one of the most helpful references when it comes to understanding the differences in cultures around the world. They illustrate for us with facts and charts that people in Australia want to be left alone to get the job done while people in Egypt want much more involvement from management. People in South Korea have the strongest preference for hierarchy and those in Denmark prefer an egalitarian culture. As communication professionals, the more we can understand these different cultures and help our organizations do the same, the more successful we will be as global organizations and citizens.
- **Virtual workers and their teams** – Managers and employees are not necessarily located in the same place anymore. Rather than connecting through face-to-face dialogue and watching the non-verbals, they are tied together by wires in computers and telephones. A nine-fold increase in virtual workers over the past five years has been reported by Nemertes Research. Tom Peters made *Management by Walking Around* a standard for good management, but that doesn't work in many cases. We now need to change that to *Management by Calling Around*. Managers need help in understanding how to communicate with virtual works, how to keep them in the loop with the information they need and how to make them part feel part of the team. As organizations combine and grow, workspace becomes more expensive, and as employees demand more flexibility, this trend is sure to grow. Some of our organizations have been traveling this path for some time, and others are just beginning. Creating the best practices for communication in a virtual environment stands as a critical challenge to tackle.

There is a myriad of research to support each of these points and books have been written about most of these topics. The challenge for the communication professional is to look at our role in addressing these necessary connections holistically to help our organizations achieve marketplace success. There are many of our colleagues who are already tackling these issues and it will be interesting to learn from their experiences, continue the dialogue about the role of the communication professional in these challenges, and celebrate the success as we prove the value of this type of work.

Let's stay connected as we go through this journey!

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