Making the case for employee communication 01

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

Sooner or later every internal or employee communicator gets asked *the question*. The very fact that it gets asks, suggests that there still is a debate to be had about the answer.
And the question is, 'Why do we bother communicating with our people?'

The question comes up in a number of different forms. It can be asked about the value we bring to our organizations or our clients. It can be posed in terms of return on investment or it might be about our role in delivering things like employee engagement or customer satisfaction.

Although the response is often obvious (what sort of organization could survive without communication?) the specific answer will vary from place to place. The exact reason for internal or employee communication will determine, in large part, how you do the job. If you don't know why communication matters in your workplace or what difference it makes, you run the risk of doing it poorly.

This chapter looks at the value that good employee communication can add to an organization and aims to help you think about the processes and practices you need to follow if you want to make a difference.

We'll start by defining some terms and then look at some of the recent theory surrounding employee communication. After that we'll explore some common approaches to deciding where internal communication (IC) adds value. Our hope is that by the end of this chapter you will know the questions you should be asking yourself as you begin to develop a strategic approach to employee communication and you'll be set up to think about auditing – the subject of Chapter 2.

What exactly is employee communication?

Let's try to get something straight at the start. We're interested in how organizations communicate. This book is about the conversation that takes place between a group of colleagues who are joined together by a common goal or set of goals. That might be to make profits in a company, to help a charity's beneficiaries or to provide government services. And when we say 'conversation', we mean things like messages to staff, listening to employees or how a leader directs and focuses their team.

This book is not about how to improve one-to-one communication or fixing broken individual interpersonal relationships in the workplace. When a pair of colleagues fall out or just can't work together, it is often described as a failure to communicate. And while interpersonal communication has similar components to group communication, they are not the same thing and not the main focus of this book.

People use a range of skills to communicate with each other. As well as our verbal skills, we rely on non-verbal cues (like people leaving the room when someone enters, or fidgeting in a stressful meeting) or on our ability to listen to what is actually being said in a conversation. These skills might be used to share information, indicate respect, negotiate, solve problems and collaborate or influence other people.

It is sometimes useful to pretend that an organization is the same as an individual when it comes to communication. When you need to explain the problems of an organization getting its message over or understanding its people, it can be helpful to use the language of the individual. Perhaps we might say 'The organization needs to listen more carefully' or complain that 'mixed messages are being sent' when what the boss does is in conflict with what she says. But we should always keep in mind that, although organizations are made up of people, they are not people.

An internal communicator is concerned with the conversation within the organization and not automatically the interpersonal skills of regular colleagues in the office or factory. The day-to-day ebb and flow of relationships between co-workers is mostly the realm of organizational communication and not what we're looking at in this book.

Having this clear saves a degree of confusion. From an academic standpoint, it is interesting to connect line management communication, peer-to-peer communication, project communication and internal corporate communication (Welch and Jackson, 2007). When you think about it, they clearly are connected but, for practical reasons, we have to draw some lines around what a communication manager can be expected to achieve in the workplace.

Context matters for employee communication

However, life is rarely simple when it comes to matters of communication. Although we are concentrating on the conversation between staff and the organization, there is naturally some overlap between the individual and the collective. Without a basic understanding of human psychology it is probably difficult to manage corporate communication or advise on messaging.

In particular, as communicators we have an important role in creating a sense of shared context in an organization. When colleagues are agreed on their objectives or the challenges facing them, the scope for misunderstanding decreases. In fact, collaboration becomes far easier when people have a shared view of what they are trying to achieve and can anticipate correctly the needs and intentions of their colleagues. We'll return to again and again to this theme in this book, especially when we talk about change and handling bad news.

So, at the most basic level, the value that we add is in fostering shared understanding within a workplace. If we do nothing else well, getting everyone on the same page immediately makes organizations work better and be more effective.

Defining employee communication

People who work in employee communication can find themselves being pulled in several directions. We can be reporters, coaches, change agents, consultants and even organizational strategists (Likely, 2008). Although it is tempting to define internal or employee communication, the range of work that gets done by practitioners can be incredibly broad and subject to some debate (Verčič *et al*, 2012).

There isn't a clearly agreed definition that tells us what employee communication is, apart from in general terms such as 'the planned use of communication actions to systematically influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of current employees' (Strauss and Hoffman, 2000: 143).

So, in the rest of this book, we'll explore what internal or employee communication is through the lens of what practitioners do and the impact which they have. However, although we're not proposing a new definition we do need to highlight a couple of elements that are worth stressing.

The Strauss and Hoffman definition mentions planning and being systematic; these are surely essential components of a strategically minded

management process. As people who have worked with, and trained, professional communicators over many years we can attest to the difference between a professional who works to a plan and a structure, and an amateur who turns up for work every day with no idea of what they are going to do. Real professionals think ahead, think about results and think about resources.

Current employees are also mentioned in the definition. In this book we do not assume that employees are paid or necessarily current. Charities or non-profit organizations commonly have employees who give their time freely or in return for a benefit such as training or work experience. Noting this point reminds us that a pay cheque is actually only a small part of the reason why people come to work.

Furthermore, ex-employees are important stakeholders for many organizations. They might be important sources of future sales (many consultancies, for example, routinely manage a large alumni network and benefit from the goodwill of ex-staffers) or may return again as workers, bringing valuable experience of how customers use products. A company's pensioners can be a powerful reminder to serving workers of the benefits of loyalty. While we are not planning on looking at alumni communication in this book, we mention it here to illustrate how varied the concerns of an employee communicator can be.

Finally, let's not get the idea that employee communication is a one-way street. Changes of technology to help collaboration and developing expectation mean listening to the 'employee voice' is increasingly important. We're in the 'listening' and 'talking' business more than the 'telling' game.

Where does the employee communicator's value lie?

It would be brilliant if there were a simple formula that said that for every kilo of communication you added to an organization there would be so many tonnes of benefit. There is a temptation to go looking for the killer fact or the brilliant case study that can be worked into a board presentation to explain exactly why we should have the budget and access that we deserve. We would be allowed to get on with the job and probably be paid a lot more!

Of course, life is not like that; in fact, it's far more fun. Organizational behaviours cannot be summed up like a high school chemistry lesson or

Figure 1.1   The value of employee communication
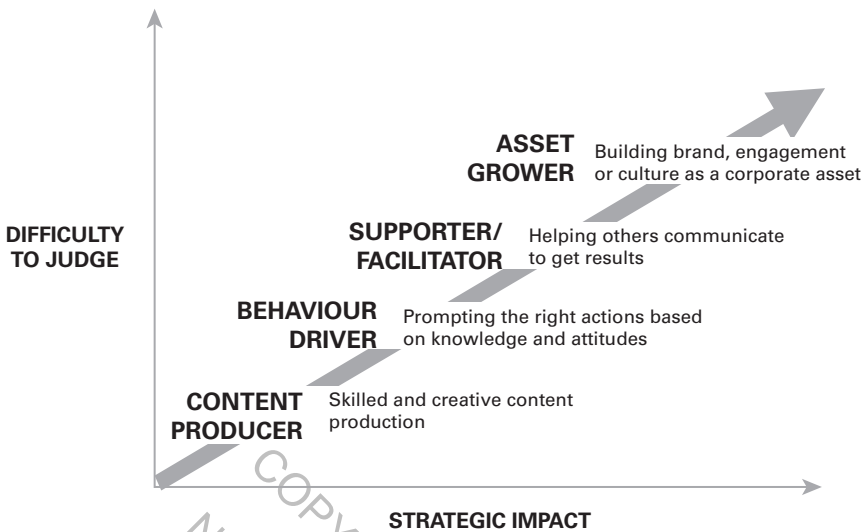
written down like a cake recipe. Communications professionals have to be in command of a subtle universe of creativity, insight and project management.

Explaining where we add value in the organizations we support is therefore challenging and often a very subjective conversation. The subtleties of how we judge the role of communications have to be weighed against the importance or strategic impact that a programme of communication might have on the organization. Figure 1.1 illustrates this idea and suggests that there are four general approaches to understanding the value of workplace communication.

The content producer

Employee communication partly has its roots in corporate journalism (Yaxley and Ruck, 2015). Some of the earliest work on employee communication was done in corporate newspapers, magazines and even film units and reflected the need to get information out to a workforce and give people a degree of pride in where they worked. Today, content production remains an important focus for employee communications teams, not least because we have access to more channels than ever before and there is a belief that workers are hungry for large volumes of lively content.

We will distinguish throughout this book between *outputs*, and *outcomes*. Outputs are communication products such as content on a website, a staff conference or a chief executive officer (CEO) webcast. Outcomes are the results that come from those communications taking place.

It is often quite simple to make a subjective judgement about the quality of IC outputs. We can track whether people are looking at it and interacting with it. As well as knowing how people are sharing our internal content, we can make a judgement about whether the material is on message or appropriate. Whether that is useful data though, is another matter; the communications team might be satisfied that a well-crafted piece of content got colleagues talking, but we do need to be aware that this doesn't mean it has actually moved the organization forward!

We should also not lose sight of the fact that in busy and challenging organizations just managing to create materials and get things done is a major achievement. As we discuss in Chapter 8, we have found that the ability to project manage and 'make things happen' is one of the most prized attributes of internal communicators (Dewhurst and FitzPatrick, 2007). Over time, the challenges facing professionals have not become any easier – being able to generate outputs is massively important and incredibly difficult.

Yet, there is little point in being busy for its own sake and there is probably little strategic value in just producing material. Unless we can show how the life of the organization is improved by a slick video or user-generated content, we may find ourselves facing some tough questions when next year's budget cuts are mooted. If there are no outcomes following all your excellent work, it amounts to little more than corporate shouting!

Explaining our value is often simpler when we can point to specific changes we have brought about as a result of communication.

Behaviour drivers

The Strauss and Hoffman definition mentioned above indicates that the purpose of planned and systematic communication is to change something; we communicate to share information, influence attitudes and drive actions. Communication is done with a purpose; with an outcome in mind. We actually think that most employee communication is about change.

Like many commentators, Strauss and Hoffman imply that outcomes can be best seen in terms of knowledge, understanding and behaviours. People commonly talk about 'know/feel/do' as the three standard objectives of

communication and it is certainly a useful formula when thinking about communication objectives. Obviously, every organization has separate pressures, and seemingly similar operations will have different needs from their workforces. A discount retailer might emphasize the need to keep rails and shelves restocked and a rapid flow of customers though the check-outs, whilst a high-end fashion store may want staff to think about the client experience and protecting brand values.

However, there are some generic behaviours which employers want to promote (FitzPatrick, 2016: 298). These will include encouraging staff to stay (in order to reduce staff turnover and manage employment costs), promoting collaboration between colleagues, helping workers focus on the right things and follow rules, promoting advocacy outside the organization and responding positively to major change.

This list of desired outcomes might be longer, but it is useful to look at the actions that could result from good employee communication. If we know what we want people to *do*, then, in theory, it is easier to ask what they need to *feel* and *know* on the path to promoting that behaviour. Yet communication is rarely the sole driver of a particular behaviour in the workplace. We do things partly because we think they are a good idea, but also because our boss orders us to do so, because they are interesting, because we have the right tools to do the job, or because there's an attractive bonus payment coming if we hit our targets. Communication promotes actions, but it is rarely the only reason why our colleagues do things; Chapter 4 argues that by deeply understanding our audiences we unlock real value for our organizations.

Supporters and facilitators

Increasingly, communicators describe themselves as people who help others achieve their goals. They often talk about being business partners or supporters. This means that instead of the value of our work coming directly from the results of what we do the benefits comes through helping others do their jobs (Zerfass and Franke, 2012). This might involve coaching a manager before they hold a staff meeting or drafting messages for a senior leader.

Communicators are often attached to specific departments or teams who see communication as essential to their mission. Information technology (IT) organizations may need a communicator to ensure that news about service changes gets out and that users know how to make use of new tools. A quality team or a safety function might have someone to drive messages in support of their missions.

Modern managers understand that communication is as much part of the management process as resource planning or data management. We help them run things operations efficiently by either supporting individuals in their leadership or helping whole functions to explain themselves. We also see opportunities that others have missed. The job is not just about visiting the CEO and taking instruction, it is also about bringing ideas that no one has thought about. It may be that we know that customer satisfaction is suffering as a consequence of unhappiness in the factory, so we might want to prompt the CEO to visit for a 'back to the floor' exercise to hear, first hand, what staff are saying. Perhaps we've noticed that staff turnover among younger colleagues is higher than expected, so we could offer some ideas around recognition to the human resources (HR) director.

Our value, therefore, often comes not from the work that we do but from the work that we empower others to do. Quantifying the value of our contribution is challenging, but we can be an ever-more integrated part of the management process and should be integral to helping achieve results.

Asset growing

Focusing on behaviours is a useful place to start when planning employee communication. For specific projects, asking at the beginning what you need people to do is valuable and a powerful guide to the results that are needed. However, is the value in employee communication only to be found in specific behaviours?

When communications leaders are asked about the purpose of their role they actually come up with a more complicated answer (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). Certainly, shaping attitudes and behaviours is important, but does it fully account for the creation of intangible assets such as employee engagement or a positive workplace culture (Alfes *et al*, 2013)? Does the importance of communication lie mainly in promoting defined feelings and actions? And where does building a brand fit into the mix?

Although closely related to behaviour, concepts of engagement or culture are not the same and have an importance that supersedes specific actions. A coffee shop or hotel might want someone to follow specific steps, for example, in delivering customer service, but are employees authentically hospitable because they are told to be so? The genuine compassion that a patient might experience from hospital staff could have less to do with a campaign

by management and more with the overall ethos of the institution. Equally, an engineer might decide to falsify emissions test results or bend safety rules because they misunderstand what their organization stands for.

People in healthy organizations think and act in common ways help it grow and achieve its purpose. In Chapter 12 we'll talk about the role that employee communicators can play in the partly organic processes that nurture intangible assets like brand, goodwill and culture (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2016). We should see it as part of our mission, although it is difficult to assess what impact we are having in practical terms. The difficulty comes in accounting for the size of the intangible asset and the contribution that internal or employee communication makes to that asset. Laying aside for the moment the debates that rage in management circles about quantifying things like brands, there are endless arguments to be had about the importance of employee communication in that mix, or indeed the type of communication that matters.

One example of the complexity is the issue of employee voice. Some writers suggest that having an outlet for employee opinions is massively important (Kang and Sung, 2017) and one of the main drivers of employee engagement (MacLeod and Clarke, 2010). Others will think it is sufficient to listen to workers only to check how much of the core messages have been understood. Undoubtedly, employee communication, listening to workers and creating a shared sense of context and purpose are important, but there is little consensus about how important.

Choosing your own value proposition

You'd be forgiven for shaking your head in despair. How on earth can a communicator show that employee communication is worth doing?

Discussions about the rate of return to be expected from investments in communication can quickly descend into farce. Finding a formula or algorithm which translates inputs into results in a commercial organization will need everyone to agree about the relative importance of factors such as pay, leadership skills, training or the equipment supplied to workers. In non-profits, which look for more complicated results than profits, the equation is bound to be even more complicated. It is almost impossible to say that a budget of X or team of Y people should have benefit Z.

This is not, of course, to suggest that there is no causal relationship between good communication and organization success. Plainly, we all see it with our own eyes and we all know that the absence of communication is a

recipe for disaster. The challenge is to understand what benefit we are seeking for our own organization and use that as our guiding compass.

Defining the value you add through employee communication

As a simple guide we find it useful to think about the core value that an IC function can offer to the organization that it supports. Our thinking is that there are probably four main areas – or value spaces – that a communicator needs to consider when thinking about what they should be doing. Figure 1.2 summarizes this. Each of these value spaces overlap and in some case are interlinked. In reality we commonly have to deliver across all four areas but need to think about the relative importance of each. The exact proportions of each one will vary depending on what your organization does, the problems it faces and even its history.

We've been partly influenced by the work of people who have tried to define the core components of employee communication (Yates, 2006) and have admired attempts to actually attach specific values to different elements

Figure 1.2   Four value spaces

Get the basics Right	Drive Outcomes	Support others	Building Intengible Assets
• Channels that reach everyone • Ways to listen • Dependability to make things happen • Routines and forward plans • Ability to report back on impact • Creativity and imagination	• Focus on communications to link knowledge, attitudes and, crucially, behaviours • Understands and speaks up regarding non-communications barriers to focuses actions • Applies audience insights	• Understands audiences better than anyone else • Understands business needs and how communications can support them • Gives persuasive advice: earns respect	• Understands the role of communications in building employee engagement • Connects external reputation or brand with employees understanding and belief • Identifies how communications helps to maintain a positive culture

of the mix. Some of this work has not always been terribly convincing but it seems that writers generally keep retuning to four areas:

- *operating effective systems* (to which we will return later in the book);
- *working to deliver outcomes* such as behaviours or positive attitudes;
- *supporting others* to achieve their goals through communication; and
- contributing to the *growth of intangible assets* in the organization (such as employee engagement, positive culture or brand).

So how do you decide which matter most to you and where should you concentrate your efforts?

Before you start worrying too much about which activity sits under which heading we should say that Figure 1.2 is illustrative only. Often, activities will sit within several or all boxes. For example, running an intelligence service that listens to employee views and concerns and shares it with leaders is a foundational role for all of the value spaces in the model. The emphasis and scale of each will vary from situation to situation, but the aim here is to explore the idea that we add value in different ways and so need to adapt our practice accordingly.

Our view is that, for now, it is very hard to tag specific cash values to the results of the work that we do. Whilst it will frequently be evident what impact our work might have, for example, on sales or in reducing accidents in the workplace, defining a return on investment with a high degree of accuracy is challenging and likely to be time-consuming.

The point is that we need to think about what our organization needs from us. Even if you can't reliably quantify the value we add, if you are working on the right things, our usefulness will be plain and the choices we have to make in defining our plans or choosing where to spend time will be clear. How we do our work will be shaped by an understanding of the value we need to add. An app designed to share operational information will look very different to one intended to support individual leaders, for example.

Pause for thought

- Do you understand the main issues that are on the leadership agenda in your organization? What are the subjects that get regularly reported on at board or senior executive meetings, and are they reflected in your communication plan?

- In your organization what are the drivers or employee engagement and where does employee communication fit in? Do you understand how well the organization is performing against the non-communication elements of engagement and are you aware of the steps to improve them?

- What support do your leaders expect from communication and have you asked them lately? When you have a conversation with leaders what can you tell them that they don't already know, for example about current employee attitudes of the effectiveness of their own messaging?

- How many of your communication plans have clearly defined objectives that are about knowledge, understanding or behaviours?

- Who would notice if the employee communication team was axed in your organization and what would they miss most?

Getting the basics right

In later chapters we will explore this area more fully. For now, the main point we want to make is that creating and managing a reliable system for delivering news and information to staff, getting people talking, listening to feedback or supporting collaboration is often the original raison d'être for many employee communication functions. Neglecting the need for essential systems and processes will get you into trouble quite quickly.

It's a message that our peers in service functions like IT understand only too well. The chief information officer (CIO) would not dream of attempting a discussion about the strategic direction of data management while the organizations is screaming that their computers don't work and email has been down for a week. There are 'utility' elements to the offer that are expected and will kill off any other conversation if they are underperforming.

For communicators, this likely means ensuring that you should be able to put a message in front of employees in a timely and engaging way, that employees can find information when they need it, that you have a process for maintaining a flow of communication and that you have a reliable way to collect and share the sentiment of employees. It will certainly involve having the capability to deliver projects as required by the organization – be that from posting content on the intranet to running the annual leadership conference. A communications team that cannot deliver these essentials will quickly find themselves replaced or disbanded.

So, the question you need to ask is what are the basics that my organization needs? These will almost certainly involve having a process for delivering current news, spaces for people to find information when they need it, a way for you to gather and report on feedback and hear employees' thoughts, and the capacity to run campaigns.

And when you know the answer, you need to think about whether this is the most important thing in your world. But we'll come back to that in a moment.

Driving outcomes

A focus on the results as well as the process of communication is an important source of value. This calls for a mindset among the team that looks for the point of any activity and thinks about the attitudinal or behavioural outcome that is needed.

It is our experience that even just asking the question 'What do we want people to do?' is often usefully provocative and forces colleagues to reconsider their plans and objectives. And naturally, once you start asking the question, you need to have the ability to provide alternative answers. Our value will not lie in telling the HR director that her planned all-staff email is a waste of time; suggesting alternative and more useful approaches will more surely win us friends than saying no all the time.

In order to deliver value in this box you will need processes for taking briefs, for developing plans linked to defined results and probably the skills and resources that enable you to turn business problems into impactful communications plans.

Supporting others

Later on we'll explore the role of the employee communicator as an advisor and an involved team player. Importantly, this role requires the communicator to think wider than messaging practice. We need to understand how our organization works, where revenue comes from, what makes our organization successful, how costs are managed, what risks we face and anything else that is the strategic concern of leaders.

The role that we fulfil is about acting as a partner and advisor rather than an order-taker. We can be most useful when we can anticipate the

communication needs of a team or of leaders and bring solutions, rather than waiting for people who are not specialists in our area to define their communication needs and turn it into a brief for us.

In Chapter 3 when we talk about objectives we look at the questions to ask when planning, as we want to suggest that our role is not just about taking orders or responding to requests but also about proposing solutions. Sometimes those solutions will go beyond pure communication advice. As well as being knowledgeable about the business and audiences we also have to be skilled as coaches and advocates for our solutions.

If this is a value space that is significant for you, your focus will extend to being a business leader in your own right and not simply a member of a team of technicians who translate defined results into communication plans.

Asset builders

Employee communicators have a role in shaping the strategic assets – brand, culture and ethos – of their businesses. It is a role that requires us to think far beyond the basic mechanics of email lists, social media content and forward editorial schedules. It requires owning one's own professionalism around communication but also being ready, as a senior player, to input on other areas of the business and not just on communication issues. Drawing on a deep knowledge of employees, of the business and of the overall strategy empowers you to contribute to the very heart of the organization. This can mean being occasionally courageous and often challenging. Our backgrounds, experiences and insights into the audience win us admission to the conversations about brands or employee engagement; it is our attitude as business leaders that equips us to contribute in ways that go beyond being corporate reporters.

If you decide that this is a space where your organization needs you to have an impact, you will undoubtedly be investing in systems that enable you to understand how communication is part of the asset-building process. You will need to understand, for example, what makes engaged employees in your workplace and where you fit in to that mix. It could result in you developing the capacity to build relationships, gather feedback and intelligence and to be a respected commentator within the organization.

It's not one or the other

The four value spaces are not mutually exclusive. You can't support leaders or build intangible assets if your basic systems are not in order. Your basics will inevitably involve having platforms for leadership communication or include a brief-taking process that looks at know/feel/do.

The point is that you have to decide in what proportion they matter to your organization and build your employee communication effort accordingly. An entrepreneur-led small business might need systems for supporting leaders more than brand building. A large multi-site organization that is heavily concerned with safety or production quality might have a stronger need for an outcome-driven operation. But whatever the lead priority, all four value spaces are likely to be present to a greater or lesser extent. The role of the strategically minded employee communicator is to look at these four areas and decide where their efforts are best focused.

Conclusion

When you are thinking about the type of communications operation you should be running, everything comes back to the point of why you do the job at all. What does your organization need from communications – is it to have a process for sharing information, gathering intelligence and community building, is it about having a team who can translate business problems into business solutions, could it rely on a function that helps the organization communicate or is it mostly concerned with building an intangible asset? Of course, for most of us, it will be a combination of all four; the challenge is to decide in which proportion they are needed and where you should be putting your effort.

However, we don't get to decide our usefulness all by ourselves. Other people in our organization will have a view about the value that we need to bring and what we bring in practice. There is no point investing tonnes of energy in providing leaders with advice or worrying about culture when your CEO thinks that a neat app does everything that is needed. You have to reflect what the organization thinks it wants, as much as what you know it needs. And that means you need to be close to the decision-makers and the corporate conversations that are taking place around you.

And there is a third sense in which value matters. Are you actually doing a good job? Are you as good as you could be at what you set out to do? If you can't deliver on the basics, are a poor advisor or just can't make things happen it is unlikely that anyone will ever see the added value that internal communication can bring. Our daily challenge is to be as good as we can be; otherwise, any of the discussion about added value is pointless. When you are effective, when people around you know that they will get a great service when they ask you for help and when leaders trust you to tell them what is going on the organization, you start to win the space to offer ever greater value.

In later chapters we will explore what good looks like. However, every organization needs a unique blend of communication and so our approach will be to pose questions as much as suggest answers. We have always agreed with Bill Quirke, one of the greatest writers on IC matters, who said that you can't take someone else's medicine. This book is about helping you draw up your own prescription.

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