

Cross-functional communication on the inside

It stands to reason that strong internal communication generates an engaged, productive and loyal workforce. Looking at internal communication - or as we so aptly put it these days, employee engagement - there are a number of cross-functional communicative approaches at our disposal.



By [Andrew McIlwaine](#) 8 Nov 2010

Effective internal communication is outlined by strategic goals, which encompasses improving morale and building positive relationships between employees and management; informing employees about changes taking place within the organisation; creating a level of understanding amongst employees of organisational imperatives such as the product or service, culture, external environment and ethical issues; contributing to productivity and quality assurance; and encouraging a level of participation and understanding amongst employees with regards to community activities and issues affecting society.

Utilising communication tools for impact

As communicators, we have access to a number of tools with which we can engage staff. The trick is to utilise those that deliver impact. That is, those tools that will reach the intended audience and most effectively influence perceptions and behaviour, ultimately engaging them. Nowadays, it isn't best practice to just throw large sums of money at rolling out elaborate communication campaigns that sparkle and dazzle internal audiences, but in addition to this ensure integrated communication activities across functions - or perhaps cross-functionally.

By cross-functional I mean working closely with all functions in the organisation to send a message. Communication across departments is vital for the successful functioning of the business. Great. So what does this mean? How is this done? Unfortunately, searching high and low for answers to questions like these has become quite the norm in our industry. However, with a focus on behavioural skills and promoting cooperation in the workplace, cross-functional communication is practised by successful organisations universally.

Integrating activities

What this implies is the integration of communication activities with other organisational activities, or business functions. This suggests that over-reliance on formal communication channels should not overshadow those channels that are more informal. Informal communication channels do not necessarily refer to the likes of the grapevine, office gossip or the rumour mill. Initiatives such as employee orientation programmes, leadership communication activities and ongoing work processes definitely work towards achieving some of the strategic communication goals outlined at the beginning of this article.

For example, while fundamentally a human resources activity, an employee orientation programme effectively communicates the reasons for the organisation's existence, its goals and objectives, vision and mission, policies and procedures, and products and services amongst other things. Therefore, it is the responsibility of communication specialists to package this information in such a way that the new employee buys into the information they receive, which will result in them being productive members of the organisation, striving towards achieving organisational goals and objectives.

Multiple communication networks

This is where cross-functionality appears. By formulating projects that require the coordination of multiple units of the organisation, multiple communication networks are developed. Take the employee orientation programme we have been discussing, as an example. HR is responsible for overseeing the development of such a programme. The communication function should be involved in cleverly packaging the programme so as to engage the employees taking part in it, as well as in disseminating the right messages through various channels. The units or departments that make up the organisation need to play a role in providing relevant information regarding their unit and the role it plays in the organisation. Management needs to ensure that the strategic intent of the business is articulated in the programme. Finally, departmental leadership must play an active role in providing the new employee with on-the-job training, and departmental orientation.

This process needs to be streamlined throughout the business, so that all employees joining are provided with equal opportunities for development within the business. Leadership communication programmes should be implemented in order to ensure activation of departmental orientation, which once again involves cross-functional communication activities.

The essence is in the fundamental role that communication plays in engaging audiences, and in this case, employees. Communicators need to give attention not only to the development of ad hoc communication campaigns, or key strategic communication activities (which we all know are vitally important), but also to the intricate communication processes that are webbed throughout any organisation, and ensure that these processes are conducive to achieving strategic goals.

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