

The power of leadership communication

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

10 Jun 2010

TORONTO, CANADA: Day two of the IABC World Conference in Toronto, Canada, earlier this week kicked off with a powerful speech by Kevin Warren, chairman of the board, president and chief executive officer of Xerox Canada. He's a strong advocate of business communication.

Warren was appointed to his current position in December 2007 after beginning his career at Xerox in 1984, and from the very first, has been an advocate of communication within the organisation. For his role in leadership communication, he was awarded the 2010 IABC Excellence in Communication Leadership (EXCEL) Award, which honours company leaders who have demonstrated superb communication skills.

When he first started, he conducted an audit to assess success of communication across the organisation. He believes that the positive impact of his efforts extends far beyond the organisation and its internal audiences to include external stakeholders as well. "Well rounded communication is imperative in any organisation", he said.

He believes that all business leaders need to be held accountable to communicate the same messages across multiple business units. He keeps management up to date on all strategic and operational functions with a periodic newsletters and podcast, while keeping all communication channels open.

Use all the tools to get the message across

Warren strongly believes that to be an effective communicating leader, online and virtual communication technology, including vodcasts, webcasts and podcasts need to be utilised in order to ensure that they are relevant to all audiences across the company. For his part, he is sure to take part in many face-to-face engagement, as well as electronic and traditional media.

Despite tough economic times, Warren managed to maintain a committed leadership approach to his employees, ultimately leading Xerox to an overall growth in a contracting market. For him, communication started at an early age with teachings of the value of the profession. "Communication is not about one person - it's a group effort with key people and experts in the profession", he says.

"We find ourselves living in the age of the unthinkable... constantly surprised by news. For business this means a new reality - business is unpredictable and ever changing. All leaders will contend with crisis - no one is immune." The tipping point for him, and his differentiator, is effective communication.

Beginning with the end in mind

Warrens says his story always begins with the end in mind. The Canadian economy is showing early signs of recovery, which spells new potential for businesses across the country. His manta for 2010 - take back revenue growth.

The proof of sound communication leadership is reflected in the company's 2009 growth figures. "The unthinkable has happened - tough economic times reflected in overall market uncertainty", says Warren, leading to tough decision and a critical turning point - something needed to be done to ensure the company did not founder during these times.

Warren took on the communication card and looked at the key it held to effective business leadership. "In business, people are your most important asset and you need to put your money where your mouth is. Communication around this is priority one", he says.

Communication takes teamwork, especially in a do-or-die contest. "I set the standard, but they played their part", says Warren, commenting on the role his team played in inculcating his desired culture of communication.

"We get the link between perception of leadership, and employee engagement - a truth amplified many fold in tough times," and a challenge Warren believes other company need to take head on. Communication does, after, genuinely start at the top.

"Our partnership is best described as implicit. Every move, from infrastructure to process, was planned in advanced, creating a sound framework for change. It was collaborative by design. Trust was implied and good instincts played a part. We employed new tools and tactics to engage with all employees across the board", noted Warren.

He humbly added, "The best form of flattery is not how you see yourself but how others perceive you".

Stay on target when communicating

In internal communication, the message takes centre stage. "You cannot communicate too much in a time of crisis, but messages must be kept on target- the right info to the right people at the right time", Warren says.

When dealing with a multinational business or a business with many different operational units, synchronised messages must be ensured for clarity, consistency and risk purpose.

Another word of advice from Kevin Warren: "The right messages must be aligned to business strategy - alignment equals power. Vision is a vital part of that." The importance of communication was in providing a future roadmap to the road of opportunity. This ensured alignment of staff to key business imperatives and more importantly ensured that all staff were working towards a common goal.

"Aspiration is motivation, motivation is belief and belief is reality", he says.

The communication path to understanding is exchange. Warren says, "vision 360 that includes communication with staff and asking to staff for ideas to contribute to the business". Many actions had tangible results - some messages were communicated and celebrated with other staff. Employees were committed to the welfare of their company and work towards a common goal. It was a show of loyalty to the company, which ultimately paid off in terms of bottom line profits.

After years of prescribing to this methodology of communication, Xerox was left with no choice but to take actions that affected staff. The organisation's leadership then set out to communicate the hard news objectively, directly, transparently and accountably. "We kept the conversation going. Along with the hard news came a personal promise to reinstitute all employee programmes as soon as the difficult times are over", said Warren.

Opportunities never wait

Staff said, "We didn't like it, but understand it". Warrens says this is the new any leader wants to hear; and yet so few will ever hear it. The trust that was built up in the organisation was cashed in against the tough times.

"If you wait for the Robbins, spring will be over", says Warren. "Opportunities never wait and risk is its companion. Uncertainty is no friend to success. Always remember that your own resolution to succeed is always bigger".

As times moved on, business profit outlooks improved and Xerox Canada now dominates the market with 50% of market share. "We didn't leave success to chance, it was completely by choice", says Warren.

No matter how good the communication plan, if it does not resonate in the street, it will not prevail. "Culture eats strategy for breakfast", says Warren. "People spend a lot of time making the right decision, but not enough time making the decision right."

Only by connecting on a rational and emotional level with employees was Xerox able to get buy-in, and the results spoke for themselves. "Communication is not the end point - we must remain ready for real business."

Getting buy-in and communication was the order of the day for Xerox, and directly contributed to the stock value rebound. Talk about a compelling example of the dual role of communication in business... and particularly during times of crisis. Communication was able to make way for progress.

Today, Xerox is at the ready. It has new communication platforms and is ready for real business... a practical application of how the company starts today, yet reflects its strong past and promising future - tomorrow, today.

ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

Daniel Munslow is the owner and founder of MOC Consulting and former director on the International Association of Business Communicators' International Executive Board. He has 16 years' experience in business communication consulting. He has worked across Africa, as well as in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and AsiaPac.

- #BizTrends2020: Reputation management, a more integrated ecosystem - 31 Jan 2020
- The role of communicators in the SDGs in Africa - 9 Mar 2018
- #BizTrends2018: Are you a reputational resilience expert or crisis fodder? - 8 Jan 2018
- Is it time to regulate the PR industry? - 14 Jul 2017
- 87% of PR executives believe the term "public relations" does not describe their future - 19 Apr 2017

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>