

Thomas J Lee: Twelve Dimensions of Strategic Internal Communication

Thomas J. Lee has emerged as one of the leading thinkers in the field of strategic communications, having more than 25 years of experience in professional communications management. As the founder and principal of Arceil Leadership Communication Ltd he has developed highly innovative approaches to the planning and evaluation of internal communication campaigns with broad strategic applications.

Identifying the mismanagement of internal communication as a primary cause of transformational failure, Lee contends that such communication is harmful to effective organisational change primarily because it is non-strategic. Working along lines similar to the groundbreaking developments of Roger D'Aprix, Lee suggests that strategic communication may be established by the observance of twelve key steps in the initiation of an internal communication campaign.

In addition, Lee has advocated the recognition of what he terms 'informal' and 'semi-formal' modes of communication as vital to such a campaign. These, combined with the formal, are the 'three voices' of corporate communication, and may be understood as follows:

- Informal: conversations in the work place, and the relationships of which these are part. The behaviour of leaders, their ability to behave as they instruct others to do, should also be considered.
- Semi-formal: the initiatives and procedures instigated by official organisational decisions, essentially the totality of management tools. Lee suggests a recognition and reward system as an example, in which the opinions of leaders will be communicated in an indirect fashion. Policies, programmes, processes and procedures are included here.
- Formal: the deliberate official communications of a company. Such communication tends to be verbal and rhetorical, although not exclusively, and acts as a single voice addressing a vast employee audience. An email sent to the entire employee network is one example here.

Lee contends that informal and semi-formal communications may actually be more potent in terms of employee response than the official information releases of an organisation. Whilst they are harder to control, and if mismanaged have the capacity to dilute the official corporate angle on a given issue, they can prove invaluable if harnessed in the correct manner. They shake off the taint of a top-down telling approach to communication, and help to develop an organisational culture, in which the business targets and company ethos become apparent throughout the employee structure.

Lee is quick to point out that the development of new modes of communication within the 'formal' category does not alter the underlying formality. Organisations who come to rely on the modern computer based modes of communication in the belief that these will automatically make a direct connection with the employee audience, are being seduced by new technology. Lee suggests that all formal modes be understood as essentially of the 'bulletin board' format. The alteration of an information interface, the mere means of access, cannot change the level of formality, even in the case of a cutting edge system, such as an intranet.

Thus Lee's central contention is that an effective strategic communication arrangement must blend the strands of formal/semi-formal/informal to create high levels of information retention in the employee audience. This should be appreciated in combination with his 'twelve dimension' theory, strongly influenced by Roger D'Aprix, to create a comprehensive overview of all essential factors in the construction of a strategic campaign.

Twelve dimensions of strategic internal communication [1]

1. Strategic orientation and imperative

Lee argues that communication is the lifeblood of an organisation and, in addition, an organisation's strategy will not be successful unless it is properly communicated. Therefore, the communication team should be oriented towards the delivery of the organisation's strategic priorities.

2. Integrity and integration

It is vital that communication is credible and consistent with the organisation's conduct. If the rhetoric is not matched by actions then the integrity of all communication will be lost. The long-term success in matching rhetoric to action will increase trust throughout an organisation.

3. Dignity and respect

Two of the fundamental building blocks of communication are dignity and respect. Lee believes that through the continued use of dignity and respect in all communications, trust and accountability will be developed on an organisational basis.

4. Flow of strategic information

It is vital for information to flow through an organisation in a timely manner. Not just down through the organisation but also upwards. Indeed a test of an organisation's ability to survive is the way it handles negative upward communication.

5. Clarity and power of messages

Clarity is paramount in all communication. When it is absent, confusion and doubt are present. A clear message will be complete, in perspective, acknowledge any gaps in the information delivered and answer questions raised by the message.

6. External perspectives

An organisation cannot communicate in a vacuum. All messages need to have an external perspective. Lee therefore argues that 'only a communication system anchored in a company's external environment can provide information in a compelling way and place it in a tenable context'.

7. Roles and responsibilities

Every employee of an organisation has a responsibility to communicate and should be rewarded for doing so. These responsibilities need to be clearly defined both vertically and laterally within the organisation.

8. Listening and visible presence

All communication needs feedback and therefore good listening both on a personal and organisational basis is required. It is through listening that people learn and it is a way of building relationships.

9. Training and support

As all employees have a responsibility for communication the appropriate training and support needs to be provided to ensure that they can meet their obligations. Support will also include ensuring that all employees are aware of the communication channels and upward feedback mechanisms.

10. Structure and process

Internal communication is all about helping the organisation to realise its goals and, as such, the structure and processes should be clearly aligned to this goal. The end result is not the communication itself but the impact it has on the recipients. In order to be successful, the communication department needs to build alliances with line managers across the organisation.

11. Measurement systems

Measurement is vital to the success of any strategic communication system. Without measurement it is impossible to tell how successful previous communication has been and to plan future messages. Measurement should focus on outcomes from the communication rather than the inputs and outputs of the communication process.

12. Continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is required in order to ensure that the communication process and systems continue to evolve and meet an organisation's needs. Organisations are constantly evolving and the communication system must be able to respond to these needs and expectations. It is also useful to benchmark best practice communication activity elsewhere on a regular basis.

[1] Thomas J Lee, 'Twelve Dimensions of Strategic Internal Communication', *Strategic Communication Management* (Melcrum Publishing, January 2002) at: www.melcrum.com