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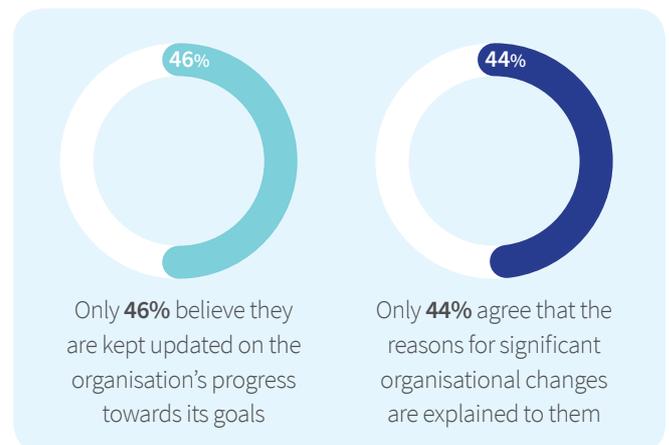
Cutting through the noise

Overcoming communication barriers to truly connect with employees

Effective communication is challenging

The importance of good internal communications for mobilising, inspiring and directing employees is equally recognised by senior managers and front-line team members. It is the most frequently mentioned improvement area in Insync's employee surveys. Yet, despite having better technologies and communication frameworks, internal communication does not seem to be improving.

Insync has measured employee engagement at more than 500 organisations covering over half a million employees and found that *less than half* of employees are satisfied with internal communications. Specifically, across the whole database:



How can this be? Why does it matter? And what can be done about it?

Understanding the difficulties

There are multiple barriers that make it harder to communicate effectively. Some of the most common challenges include:

- **Noise** – the proliferation of communication media means that employees are typically inundated with irrelevant and inconsistent messages. The problem of too little communication has now become a problem of too much (irrelevant/unclear) communication
- **Tyranny of distance and mobility** – having numerous and remote locations, more working from home and mobile working at client premises and other locations makes it harder to forge strong connections with employees
- **Tyranny of time** – different shift patterns and part time and casual working arrangements reduce face to face interaction and the opportunity to build informal relationships
- **Perceptions of senior leadership** – when the senior leadership team is not aligned around a clear vision and strategy or when there is a disconnect between what is said and what is done, employees have less trust and confidence in the messages they receive
- **Inexperienced or ill-informed team leaders** – unclear direction, fear and uncertainty relating to change, limited leadership skills, high workloads and competing priorities can undermine the effective cascading of messages via middle managers
- **Fragmented and overlapping media and channels** – many organisations don't have disciplines or protocols around when and how all-staff messages are sent out, meaning that people often receive multiple, fragmented pieces of a story which are often confusing or conflicting. This is compounded when complex and emotional messages aren't communicated primarily through personal channels (humans talking) while simple and mundane messages aren't communicated primarily via mass media (email and electronic channels) thus limiting the effectiveness of both

Why effective communication matters

You can look at it two ways... Why does poor communication undermine success so much? Or why does effective communication make such a big difference in driving success?

Lack of effective (or "lack of or ineffective") communication breeds uncertainty and doubt. It turns into rumours and workplace gossip, increases employee stress, lowers productivity and inhibits organisational performance. This all contributes to decreased levels of customer service, increased employee attrition and ultimately negatively affects the bottom line.

Conversely, effective communication builds trust, connection, engagement and ultimately, employee and customer loyalty. High performing organisations are clear on their strategy and goals. Their people are energised by the long-term direction and feel connected through visibility and strong engagement from senior leadership. This energy is filtered down through empowered and connected team leaders, who help to align and enable their teams to execute the agreed strategy. Connected teams also better facilitate not only top-down communication, but an ongoing two-way dialogue between leaders and employees.

Making it work

Communication practices need to be tailored to the organisation's unique culture and context. However, there are a few guiding principles applicable to all organisations. This section outlines a framework for assessing, aligning, and activating communication practices that will have more impact. This is not an easy process and requires ongoing feedback, planning and effort. It takes time, ongoing iterations and persistence! But the reward of an informed, aligned and engaged workforce is well worth the effort.



A. Assess

Start by considering how effective your current communication practices are. A well designed employee survey will tell you how well you are getting your messages across. Most surveys will have a few items that seek feedback on communication effectiveness. Our benchmark database tells us when fewer than 60% of respondents have positive perceptions relating to communication, it is a clear sign that improving communication must be prioritised.

In the likely event that your communications need improvement, conduct an assessment of current practices across the organisation, mapping out the current communication framework and how it operates in practice. Exhibit 1 in the 'Communication Assessment and Improvement Worksheet' can help to guide your assessment.



Some questions to consider:

- What communication practices are currently used? What communications take place via mass communication, interactive communications and personal communications?
- Why are these practices used; what is the purpose of each?
- Who manages/owns each communication practice?
- How are these communication practices monitored?
- When are these practices used; what is the expected frequency of each?
- Who is responsible for the overall architecture of communications to ensure that the various channels all fit together in a coherent whole?

A relatively quick way to get to useful employee input and feedback on some of the above questions is to conduct a 10-minute online poll of employees to understand their needs and preferences, for example:

- What are the topics you would like to know more about? (e.g. organisational strategy, performance, employee news, customer news, policies and procedures, new business, upcoming events, etc.)
- What are your preferred modes of communication? (email, intranet, newsletters, videos, podcasts, organisation-wide staff meetings, department meetings, manager meetings, road shows, etc.)
- How often would you like to receive communications on different topics (e.g. weekly/ fortnightly/ monthly/ quarterly)
- What could we do differently to improve our communications with you? (free text)

Understanding the current state of play is a critical first step to inform how you should move towards your desired state. This will also make it easier to identify good practice as well as where there may be holes in the current approach, or where additional support may be needed (for example, leadership training and development).



Once you have understood the current state of play, the next step is to develop and implement a well-considered communications plan and approach. As stated previously, over-communication and inconsistent communication are as much a problem these days as under communication. Leading organisations have a clearly thought out communications plan that meets the following criteria:

- The needs and interests of different employee groups are clearly defined

- Communications are well crafted and relevant
- Messages are consistent and there is coherence between internal and external branding
- The right communications channels are used
- There is a process for consolidating messages to minimise random and confusing updates from multiple sources – perhaps via a weekly or fortnightly CEO update or employee bulletin
- There is clear responsibility for coordinating communication across the organisation, perhaps under the leadership of a dedicated communications manager who helps craft important messages and manage communications channels.

High performing organisations will typically identify all the communications channels available to them and specify which types of messages will go up and down (two-way communication) the different channels.

These organisations make use of electronic and mass distribution channels mostly for information sharing. These include website, intranet, emails, newsletters, videos and podcasts. They use multiple face-to-face and personal channels for embedding their vision and values, and for explaining their strategy and keeping people informed on progress.

Face-to-face channels are mapped out to ensure that any gaps and overlaps are minimised. These channels include:

- Organisation-wide staff meetings (monthly, quarterly, six monthly or annually)
- Department meetings (weekly, fortnightly or monthly)
- Conference calls with the extended leadership team (usually monthly)
- One-on-one meetings between managers and team members (weekly, fortnightly or monthly)
- All staff conferences (usually quarterly or annually)
- Road shows, where the CEO and executives visit all sites or regional offices (at least annually).

While face-to-face communication is resource intensive, it is the most effective way to inspire and align people around your vision and strategy.

Consider:

- What communication channels are currently used in practice?
- What new channels are available which could provide value?
- Is there the right mix of mass communication, interactive communication and personal/face-to-face communication?

- Have the disadvantages of each mechanism been negated by other mechanisms?
- What flexibility is incorporated to accommodate staff communication preferences?

Update and align your communication framework with the purpose, expectations and requirements that the different communication mechanisms must fulfil for your organisation. See Exhibit 2 in the 'Communication Assessment and Improvement Worksheet' for a good template on face-to-face communication channels.

To be most effective, ask for input from the leadership team, team leaders and staff. Once finalised and agreed, policies, procedures, systems and processes need to be aligned to support the communication requirements.

C. Activate

Assign responsibility to leaders and other organisational champions to manage communications within and across teams based on your communication framework. Ensure leaders and managers see communication as a key part of their role, and understand it is their responsibility to understand, support and cascade key messages through the organisation, and to build a rapport and relationship with their direct reports. As a senior leadership team, paint a picture and role model what strong communication looks like. Hold effective meetings (with clear outcomes), provide regular updates and forums for discussion and ensure regular one-on-one meetings with your direct reports is a non-negotiable.

Raise visibility of the expectations for organisational communication. Embed these practices into policies and procedures and live by them every day, until it just becomes the cultural norm.

As you roll out your communication plan seek ongoing feedback to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of your communications. This can be done informally as part of face to face meetings as well as more formally via polls and pulse surveys. Strengthening your ability to listen and adapt is vital to ensuring that you are achieving your communication goals.

Summary

While the importance of effective internal communication is obvious and recognised by leaders and team members alike, it is very hard to get the right information to the right person at the right time. Our research shows less than half of employees are satisfied with their organisation's communication processes.

While new technologies have opened new channels and communication mechanisms, all too often this leads to a deluge of confusing and unconnected data that doesn't fit into a coherent whole. We argue that being systematic is as important as being creative. To improve communications it is important to do a thorough stock take of what mechanisms are being used and how they fit together. A purposeful communication framework must then be established that clearly differentiates what is communicated via impersonal, broadcast mechanisms and what is communicated via personal, face to face. Finally, leaders need to take personal responsibility for communicating effectively, including seeking ongoing feedback so that they can continue improving communication effectiveness.



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Exhibit 1 – Overview and assessment of internal communication channels

| Category | Methods | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Mass communications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mass emails • Intranet • Newsletter • Internal blog | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation/record of communication • Reduced risk of important document destruction • Easy access for all employees to information • Connects all departments/team of organisation • Knowledge sharing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building and designing internal blogs/ intranets can be time-consuming • Intended tone can be mis-interpreted • Over-use can result in messages being lost/not absorbed |
| Interactive communications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile communications • Sharepoint /shared drives • Discussion forums • Virtual team meetings • Corporate team building | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More efficient than a face-to-face meeting • Voice and tone can be heard and recorded • Improved connection with remote workers • Allows for open discussion • Corporate games can allow both team building and communication of major changes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less personal • Harder to tailor specific messages for individual requirements and preference • For larger groups, it becomes harder for all participants to engage and may reduce two-way communication |
| Personal/face-to-face | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one meetings • Chat and private messaging • Story telling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces uncertainty by allowing follow up questions and discussion • Better for delivering sensitive information • Allows for mentorships and building of relationships • Allows participants to read body language/ tone • Stories can be an impactful way to deliver a message and create a trusting and loyal culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach of message limited to employees • Often no official documentation of discussion to later refer to • Often requires planning and preparation |

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Exhibit 2 – Communication framework

| Mechanism | Focus | Frequency | Topics | Owner |
|--|------------------------------------|----------------|--|---------------------|
| All staff meeting | Company updates | Monthly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic plan update • Department/team updates • Client success stories • Employee milestones | Executive Assistant |
| Joint Executive and Senior Management Team meeting | Strategy | Monthly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational planning • Setting and oversight of strategic priorities • Strategic plan alignment, implications and understanding | Executive Assistant |
| Senior Management Team meeting | Operations | Weekly-monthly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic priority progress and update • Resourcing • Knowledge share • Project update/work in progress | COO |
| One-on-one direct report meetings | Employee wellbeing and development | Monthly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check-in/wellbeing • Workload and work priorities • Goals and progress • Professional development and aspirations | Team leaders |
| Department/ team meetings | Company updates/ team impacts | Monthly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress towards budget • Project update/work in progress • Client success stories • Knowledge share | Team leaders |