



Elevate your leadership communication strategies

By Ajit Kambil

AS a C-level executive taking on a new role, it's important to quickly establish or elevate your communications program. The higher you go, more the people within the organization who want to know what you will be doing and how you will be doing it. You may have inherited hundreds or even thousands of staff distributed across the world, to whom you may need to communicate renewed mission, strategy, or brand objectives. Furthermore there may be numerous other stakeholders outside of your company that you have to communicate to (for example, investors, bankers, customers). As first impressions matter, a transition is a good time to step back and create a communications program to help you influence stakeholders and achieve your objectives.

While many executives in our transition labs recognize the importance of communications, we find few have access to sufficient or capable communications support in their

companies. Often, when communications support is available, it lacks a systemic approach, and there is considerable variance in the quality of this support. Given the complexity of modern multinational organizations, the number of stakeholders a CxO must connect with, and the competition for attention across channels, it is essential to execute a disciplined communications program to get across the critical message to key stakeholders without it being drowned by the noise or lost in translation.

This article frames a simple model to help C-level executives proactively create and execute a disciplined communications program that aligns to their core objectives. This communications cascade requires incoming executives to establish clarity around nine key elements of their communications program: priorities, audiences, audience-specific objectives, messages, packaging, channels, delivery, frequency, and feedback.

CONVERSATION VERSUS COMMUNICATION

The communications cascade may seem like a hierarchical structured template for one-way communications from you to an audience. It does not have to be so. You may have positions and viewpoints you communicate through conversations and dialogue with other stakeholders. Indeed you may modify your positions and viewpoints based on the dialogues with stakeholders. Conversations are part of the communications process, useful for establishing mutual understanding and revising priorities and messages. The cascade, while appearing linear, is not meant to be a one-time effort. Instead it should be a dynamic process with feedback that is reviewed and reshaped every six months or so to be relevant, timely, and effective.

- 1. Align communications to your priorities.** A good starting point would be your core go-forward priorities. In a previous article we looked at how to elevator pitch your top priorities.¹ Once you have clarity on key priorities, it makes sense to create a communications strategy specific to each priority, which then becomes part of an overall communications program.
- 2. Define critical audiences.** For each priority, define your critical audiences. Who do you need to communicate to? Who do you need to hear from? As an incoming CFO, for example, you can have many different audiences you need to communicate to. These may be your direct-report leadership team, your entire finance organization, the executive committee, the whole company. The first step to a communications strategy for a specific priority is to define the audiences.
- 3. Define audience-specific objectives around each priority.** Let us assume that as a CFO, your priority is to create a more accountable finance organization that delivers insights and value to the businesses. With each audience, you are likely to have different goals. For example, initially, with your direct leadership team, your goal may be to have them step up and take more responsibility for decisions and delivery of insights to stakeholders. With the CEO and peer executives, your goal may be to demonstrate progress on your objective. Thus, for each priority you may have different communication intents and goals for different audiences.
- 4. Define critical messages.** For each audience under a priority, there will be different messages at different points of time. From the above example of creating a more accountable finance organization that delivers insights and value to the business units, you are likely to have different messages for your staff and your business peers at different times. With your team, you may first want to communicate revised expectations. Next, you may want to communicate examples of behaviors and actions that create the value you want to demonstrate to the businesses. Finally, you may want to establish a scorecard that helps your team track progress against the objective. With your peers and the CEO, you may want to communicate timelines for forthcoming actions, such as upgrading select staff, and also report tangible ways finance added insights to the business to demonstrate progress on this objective. In short, having your straw-man messages to different audiences clarified across a timeline can help with the effective construction and distribution of messages as needed.
- 5. Package your messages.** Once you have defined some key messages, the next step is to consider how they are best packaged for delivery. The key here is that

BEWARE OF THE INAUTHENTIC AND INANE

Today there is a proliferation of electronic communications channels within and across organizations—Yammer, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and so on. As a leader, you may be counseled to be present on these channels by your marketing and communications staff; they may even write messages for you to disperse on these channels. Some even directly send messages on your behalf. Do not feel compelled to post communications on these channels just because they are available—doing so without care makes you look inauthentic and inane. For example, I often get recommendations on so-called thought leadership pop up on my LinkedIn feed from executives—with a one liner such as “Great article on the future of X.” When you open the article and find it to be lame, it simply makes you think the executive who endorsed it is inauthentic or inane. They probably never read it (thus inauthentic) and probably left it to someone else to formulate their post. These new online channels are useful tools when you are authentic and credible in using them to effectively connect with key stakeholders. But beware of serial endorsing and other such online communication behaviors. Your name may appear frequently online but also adversely undermine your credibility. If you endorse a piece, say why it personally resonated with you and at least read it before endorsing it. Be discerning in your online communications and choose to be credible and authentic by truly personalizing them.

your intended audience understands and, ideally, responds to your message in a way that you want. So, will your messages be communicated as stories or will they be communicated in a factual report or data dashboard? Will the messages be communicated through direct requests and conversations? Different types of messages are best packaged in a format that best conveys the message. Generally where behavioral or belief changes are required, stories may be a more memorable and effective format (see Gallo and Denning on the power of stories).²

Given the adage a picture is worth a thousand words, packaging also means considering how messages will be conveyed—through infographics, videos, and other formats that are impactful to audiences.

Another aspect of packaging is to *carefully consider the language and cultural fit* of the examples and stories you will use. In modern global companies, where significant operations are located in countries that speak a different language, you may also want to have a local manager either translate or communicate on your behalf, and ensure your messages and stories are culturally appropriate.

6. **Think through who will deliver the messages.** When you define a communications program, you do not have to deliver it all by yourself. Sometimes it is more effective when others deliver messages on your behalf.

Whether it is your leadership team or staff sharing their experiences in a town hall, including others in the communication of the message can help demonstrate critical team behaviors. When others deliver the messages in addition to you, it can show visible commitment from team and peer leaders. Peer stories may also be more powerful in their impact than top-down messages.

7. **Select channels for communication.** Today, executives have numerous channels for communication within the organization and externally. Email, work networking systems like Yammer, LinkedIn, and Twitter combined with video, teleconferencing, and webcasting provide a plethora of electronic options with a wide reach. These can also be combined with in-person town halls and other meeting formats to combine in-person conversations and broad online communications. Select your communication channels depending on the nature of the messages, the importance of different stakeholders, the number of stakeholders to communicate to, and their geographic dispersion.

8. **Define communication frequency.** For each priority, audience, message, and channel, define the frequency of your communications. For example, as a CFO, you may work with the CEO and go over quarterly earnings in a companywide town hall. For your entire

organization you may similarly do a town hall once or twice a year to ensure alignment of objectives and priorities. For other communications you may need to set up in-person meetings. Defining the frequency and channels can help clarify the demands of a communications program on your available time.

9. Seek feedback and evaluate your communications.

To assess if your communications strategy is working, you may want to get feedback from your different audiences. You can get feedback from direct conversations with a sampling of your audiences, where you get a chance to assess how well they understand your messages and agenda. For events such as web seminars and town halls, you can use online surveys to gather feedback on the effectiveness of these communications. Feedback can help shape improvements to the communications program.

The communications cascade above provides a systematic approach toward building a communications program. You can use it to ask an insourced or outsourced communications professional to shape a communications strategy for each of your individual priorities and audiences, and an overall program for you

early in your transition. Given that attention is a scarce resource, it is important for the communications professional to design an overall program that is respectful of the different audiences' and your time.

A good communications program also helps you assess how much effort and time you will have to put into communications. It will clarify your messages and ways of engaging critical stakeholders. An authentic and credible communications program can help persuade and inform key stakeholders on your intentions and successes, and this in turn can accelerate your impact on the organization.

Takeaway

All too often, senior executives underestimate the communications effort required to influence and make a difference in their organization. Frequently, internal communications support for senior executives is either unavailable beyond the CEO's office or, when available, is ad hoc and not systematic. Working through the communications cascade early in the transition with a good communications professional can help you clarify your asks of them, and both frame and execute a systematic communications agenda efficiently to achieve your organizational objectives.

Dr. Ajit Kambil is the global research director for the CFO program and the creator of Deloitte's Executive Transition Labs.



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