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CW Bulletin

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Printer-friendly Feedback

Help CEOs See Communication as a Business Process

by Angela Sinickas, ABC, IABC Fellow

My first day as a communication vice president started with my new employer's CFO stopping by my office to welcome me to the company in a rather disturbing way: "I have no idea why Michael [the CEO] created your position," he said. "As far as I can tell, you're just a drag on my bottom line. But welcome to the company anyway."

As my unnerving experience illustrated, some C-suite executives know in their bones that effective communication helps them achieve their business goals, which is why the CEO had created my position. Unfortunately, executives like him are in the minority. So how can you educate a senior executive who has not yet "seen the light" to value the communication function—and you—more highly?

As odd as it may sound, the more executives believe we fully understand the business dynamics of the organization, the more valuable we seem to them as communicators. As much as we dread having our deathless prose rewritten by executives, they dislike wasting their time fixing the mistakes we make because we don't comprehend how different aspects of the business affect each other, or the negative consequences if our original draft was made public. Their annoyance leads them to avoid using our help to communicate, and they try to dictate messages word for word so we don't create new problems for them.

Two other keys to changing the way executives work with us are to plan communication in a way that focuses on changing stakeholder behaviors (not just increasing awareness), and to use communication research as an ongoing tool to make leaders more successful.

Planning for behavior change

Too often executives treat communicators like order-takers. They dictate key messages they want people to be aware of, or they insist on a particular communication tool. As long as we simply comply, we will never be seen as much more than glorified administrative staff. The way to change this relationship dynamic begins with communicators asking a key question after taking notes on the original request—either, "What problem have you observed that leads you to believe we need this communication?" or "How will you know if this communication is effective?" Either question opens the

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discussion to identifying a business problem or opportunity that the communication should address, and specific stakeholder behaviors that need to be changed in order to achieve the business goal.

If we want to prove that our work has a business value, we must focus on changing behavior, because only behaviors have a financial value against which we can calculate a return on investment. There is no financial value associated with greater knowledge or more favorable attitudes—until they result in a financially desirable behavior change.

Once we identify the type of behaviors we want to produce, we can conduct research with stakeholders to identify which ideal messages might change their behavior. While there may be some overlap with the executive's key messages, very often many of those original messages are irrelevant and a host of other types of information and messages will be required to change attitudes, and then behavior. Also, the original communication medium requested by the executive often falls far short of being able to support behavior change.

One CEO I interviewed as part of a communication audit captured this issue perfectly when he said, "Our communication department should be more focused on the listeners' needs, not on what our directors want to tell people."

The value of ongoing communication research
The first benefit of conducting stakeholder research as part of every communication you plan is that it makes you more likely to develop the right messaging in the first place, messaging that will result in a business-affecting behavior change. The second benefit is that you'll have ammunition for justifying your recommended approach if your executives initially disagree with it.

For example, one client's new leadership team planned to announce a new company strategy. We pretested the original language they planned to use in several focus groups and identified in advance several elements employees were reacting to with either questions or outright disagreement. Based on the feedback, the strategy messages were clarified, expanded and supported by customer research the company had conducted, but had not yet shared with employees. As a result, the new leadership team was perceived as taking the company in the right direction, with a deep understanding of internal and external issues.

Another client's new CEO had spent six months talking about his vision of doubling the company's value. A simple question we asked employees showed that more than two-thirds misinterpreted the types of new business the CEO wanted to pursue (fewer, larger-budget contracts) and instead were signing up a great many small-budget contracts that were losing money. Sharing this data with the CEO led him to fine-tune the way he defined his vision and to add concrete examples.

Ongoing research does not mean launching weekly surveys or holding monthly focus groups. It can be as simple as talking with five to 10 members of a key stakeholder group by phone or in hallways. One of the things my former CEO valued was that before he went to speak to various groups, I would talk with a number of audience members to identify what was on their minds and what had been occurring recently that people were either concerned about or proud of. I would also raise topics that I knew the CEO wanted to talk about to gauge their potential reactions. We used all of this intelligence in planning his presentations and preparing for potential questions. It's not surprising that he was extremely popular because he always seemed to have his finger on the pulse of every location he went to, and he always had specific answers for their tough questions.

Even a CFO can see the light
By the way, there was a happy ending to my experience with the CFO who saw my position as an unnecessary cost. A few months after I joined the company, he was named

interim CEO of one of our business units. While there, he had a chance to experience the bottom-line value of the communication manager I had hired for his unit—including one safety communication campaign that was so successful it reduced the company's vehicle insurance premium by US$1 million. When the communicator announced she was getting married, the former CFO's panicked comment to me was: "What if she decides to stay home and have children? How will I be able to run my company without her?"

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