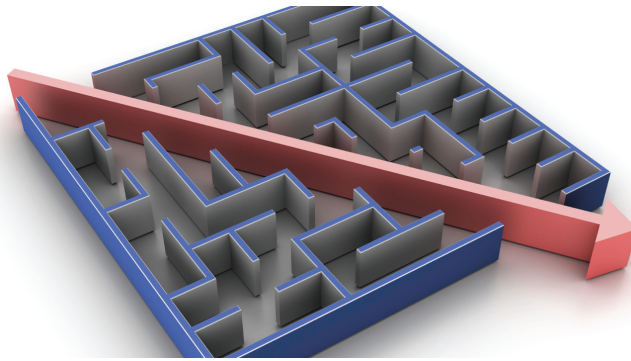


How research can simplify strategies



In an executive's world, sometimes the more complex business strategy is, the more likely it appears to address all the underlying issues leading to the desired result. Unfortunately, complex strategies often lead to complex communication – which is less likely to make sense to the employees who will need to implement the strategy.

From 13 priorities to five

For example, one client's recently installed leadership team planned to announce a new business strategy involving 13 key priorities. Research conducted in one day, with three focus groups in each of three locations, identified widespread concerns and confusion that resulted in reducing the priorities from 13 to a more manageable (and memorable) five. Some of the original priorities actually became tactical action plans to help achieve one or more of the simplified priorities.

We also pre-tested the original language they planned to use and identified a number of elements employees were reacting to with either questions or outright disagreement. Based on the feedback, the strategy messages were clarified and supported by customer research the company had conducted. As a

result, the new leadership team was perceived as taking the company in a clearly understood direction that made sense to employees.

The research also identified that the way the company had typically communicated strategy needed to change to involve a greater degree of dialogue.

Simplicity works better, faster

Shortly after I had been hired as a vice president of communication at a former employer, my CEO and CFO wanted me to use communication to help them solve a business problem. Due to a change in the way insurance companies reimbursed healthcare companies like ours for nurses' visits to patients' homes, we were suddenly losing money. While we used to be reimbursed for each visit made to a patient's home, we were now being paid a fixed fee to take care of a patient for a period of time, regardless of how many visits were required to do so.

The good news was that the C-suite executives recognized communication could be used as a business tool. The bad news was that they had already developed a complex communication strategy for me to execute. They wanted me to develop a financial literacy campaign to teach nurses about profit and loss so that they would stop making what my executives called "unnecessary visits."

Anyone who knows a nurse instantly recognizes the folly of trying to get nurses to care more about a financial result than a patient outcome. Fortunately, I had recently

conducted focus groups with some of these nurses, as well as accompanied them on their home visits as part of my learning about the company. I advised my new bosses that their requested communication would take a great deal of time, cost a lot of money, and in the end would not change nurses' behaviors. I suggested an alternative communication strategy that could be accomplished in the following week and would cost the company nothing. They liked that.

Because of my research, I had observed first-hand that nurses sometimes showed up at the home of patients who had been sent back to the hospital by their physicians. I had also noticed that nurses often discovered patients were running low on various medical supplies when they arrived at the patient's home, which meant they would need to return again before the next medically necessary visit just to deliver the needed supplies.

The simple communication approach we used was to have the nursing manager in each branch ask nurses during their regular weekly staff meeting to change two things about the way they did their jobs:

1. Every morning, call each patient's home to make sure they were not in the hospital before setting out on their daily round of visits.
2. While they spoke with the patient or a family member, go through a list of supplies that the patient might be running low on so they could bring those with them that same day, instead of having patients wait a few days until they could stop by just to drop off the supplies.

In nurses' minds, these requests improved patient care, so they quickly changed their behavior. To executives' delight, these same behaviors reduced the number of unnecessary visits and improved the bottom line starting with the first month of the communication. In fact, we never even mentioned the business strategy to nurses, even though their behaviors helped to fulfill it.

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