

Assess budgets, staffing models and infrastructure to measure the overall effectiveness of the function

## EVALUATING COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES

The way in which the communication function is structured and resourced will largely determine how well it is able to meet the business needs of the organization that it serves. Angela Sinickas suggests that communication leaders take some time to assess the overall effectiveness of the function.

So much of the research communicators do is focused on measuring the messages and channels we manage, how effective our employees and external stakeholders think they are, and the business outcomes of our communication.

Yet, we also need to assess our own budgets, our staffing models, where we report – our infrastructure – to see how well they support our organization and the communication that needs to be accomplished.

A good approach for this evaluation is to identify the ideal infrastructure, measure the current infrastructure, assess any gaps between ideal and current, and plan for any needed corrections, as illustrated below:

| Research technique               | Identify ideal | Assess current |
|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Interview/survey executives      | X              | X              |
| Inventory people, channels, time |                | X              |
| Interview/survey communicators   | X              | X              |
| Benchmark with other companies   | X              |                |



The research tools mentioned above can help in different stages of the evaluation. These are described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

**Angela Sinickas**, ABC, is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc. – an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through targeted diagnostics and practical solutions. For more information visit: [www.sinicom.com](http://www.sinicom.com)

### Interview/survey clients

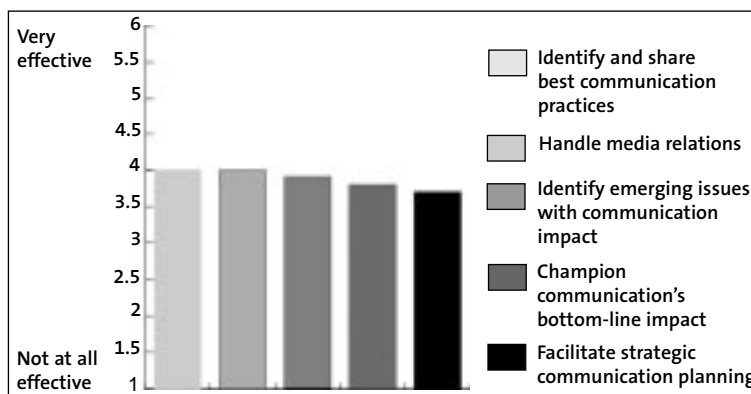
- Interview executives and middle management clients for the ideal communication structure and staff competencies they perceive are needed to support their business goals.
- Conduct a client survey assessing the current level of the communication staff's competencies, skills and behaviors identified from the interviews. Have them rate each one on its perceived importance to the success of their projects and how well it is currently being fulfilled. The ideal communication model should be sure to retain the competencies rated as both important and fulfilled well, and also address corrections to strengthen the competencies rated as important but not being fulfilled well (similar structure as in Figure One, below).

### Inventory channels and people

- Quantify the number of communicators, including full-time, part-time, freelance, consultants and "volunteers" who assist with distribution of communication or do local newsletters. Assess their experience levels.

- Identify the percent of communicators' time spent on various internal and external communication responsibilities to match against clients' stated needs for each. Also track the time spent being proactive versus reactive, or being strategic versus tactical. Track how much time is spent supporting various levels or units in the organization and compare that against their relative size or importance to the organization overall.
- Add up budgets for various communication responsibilities, sponsorships, etc. throughout the organization, including budgets that might currently be under other departments, such as a plant newsletter paid for out of the plant's operating budget.
- Inventory all the channels of communication used in different parts of the organization. Identify best practices and inconsistencies.
- Identify communicators' reporting relationships, including which department they reside in and what level of management they report to.
- Inventory the current competencies and expertise of the communicators (using self-evaluation and manager

Figure One: Survey of communication roles rated as important



assessments). Go beyond people's internal/external communication resumes and look at the underlying skills and knowledge that are transferable from one position to another. Identify gaps between the needed and available experience, knowledge and skills for each job and job candidate. This can later be matched against the ideal profiles for various jobs under the new infrastructure and used for matching people to new job descriptions, building project teams, succession planning and identifying training needs (see Figure Two, below). Determine whether any competency gaps are best closed by training or structured new "stretch" projects for incumbents, job swapping among candidates, or hiring from the outside.

### Interview/survey corporate and unit communicators

- Identify the ideal versus the actual relationship between the corporate communication staff and communicators in business units or regional locations as well as between operating management and communicators.
- Identify content that should come from different levels of the organization.
- Assess how well staff think communication channels work, how fully stakeholder needs are

met, how effectively messages support company goals – then brainstorm new ideas.

- Identify what resources communicators would like to have and how well the current ones (training, conference calls, support in crises, etc.) are meeting their needs.

### Benchmark against other companies

- Identify ideal companies against which to benchmark staffing levels, budgets, reporting relationships, time spent being proactive/reactive, strategic/tactical, etc. The companies should match your own in terms of relative size, service/manufacturing orientation, public/private ownership, geographic scope, revenue, etc., although you may want to benchmark larger companies if your organization is anticipating a rapid growth rate.
- Be careful to identify not only staffing and budgets, but what responsibilities those people have and what those budgets are spent on, or the benchmarking might result in misleading conclusions about the efficiency of your own infrastructure (see Figure Three, above). Also be sure to ask the other companies how effective they think their own infrastructure is in meeting their organizations' needs. Other

Figure Three: Benchmark communicators' responsibilities

| Level of involvement in:   | A | B | C | D | E |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attitude surveys           |   |   |   |   |   |
| Closed-channel TV or video |   |   |   |   |   |
| Broadcast voice mails      |   |   |   |   |   |
| Broadcast e-mails          |   |   |   |   |   |
| Supervisor/employee comms  |   |   |   |   |   |
| All-employee meetings      |   |   |   |   |   |
| All-manager meetings       |   |   |   |   |   |
| Recognition/holiday events |   |   |   |   |   |

Responsible for  
  Involved in  
  Not involved in at all

companies' communicators may not be satisfied with their own organizational approaches.

### Analyze findings

Once all this information has been gathered, you may realize that your communication staff's infrastructure needs only minor adjustments in reporting relationships or outsourcing. On the other hand, you may decide to completely re-invent the role of the function in your organization.

Whatever the new structure you're proposing, first anticipate the potential negative outcomes of your recommendation, not just the current weaknesses it would address.

For example, if you decide to move to a shared services structure, one of the weaknesses is that your managerial "clients" will typically seek help only at the last minute when they experience serious problems or anticipate major changes – similar to how PR agencies tend to be used.

Unless your new structure also includes communicators embedded in various locations and business units, you may lose the ability to influence and improve day-to-day communication before it reaches a crisis stage, because you will be too far removed from where the needs of the business evolve.

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Figure Two: Example of a career development worksheet if a particular candidate was moved to a new job

| Competencies needing strengthening for Job A | Reading | Training | On the job |
|--|---------|----------|------------|
| Public speaking                              |         | X        |            |
| Multi-cultural communication                 | X       |          |            |
| Budgeting                                    |         |          | X          |