

The best way to find out what cascade method works for your employees is to use research

EVALUATING YOUR CASCADE PROCESS

Most communicators agree on the importance of face-to-face communication in changing attitudes and behaviors. But many disagree on whether the team-briefing “cascade” of information from senior management to the lowest-level employee is the most effective way to impart knowledge. The best way to find out, says Angela Sinickas, is to use research.

One of the topics often intended for discussion during the team-briefing process is company goals. Examining my survey database on how many people feel well or very well informed on this topic shows some interesting variations in responses by job level. The differences are even more pronounced for organizations at the extremes of how they use the cascade.

When cascade is primary source

Two organizations at the time of their surveys relied on the cascade as their primary source of employee communication (see Figure One.) They had no newsletters and only primitive, out-of-date intranets. Mass e-mails were rarely used, and generally only for bad news.

Organization A had very highly informed directors who heard about company goals directly from the senior leadership team on a monthly basis. The problem started with the managers they were supposed to share that information with: there was a drop in understanding of nearly 20 percentage points. Another 20 points were lost in the transmission to non-managerial employees.

Organization B's CEO said he expected his vice presidents to share information from leadership

meetings with their staff, but we learned that due to a long history of company secrecy before the president took his position, the vice presidents pretty much shared nothing with their staff. However, in both companies, the level of information for the lowest-level employees was about half of what it was for director-level management.

If mass communication leads

Most large organizations these days have at least some type of mass communication vehicles in place for employees to supplement face-to-face team briefings. However, if those communications are relatively infrequent (monthly or quarterly, for example), the cascade again takes on a more important role in passing along news since the official news is so infrequent.

We looked at the database again to see how information levels varied in organizations that used daily newsletters, which actually have a chance to supersede the timeliness of rumors or official team briefings about company plans.

Survey results illustrated in Figure Two show that in the three organizations with daily newsletters, the average drop in information levels was much less noticeable than in the other organizations where the cascade had to take on a bigger role in passing along timely information.

The differences are pretty dramatic. Although high-level managers start out at about the same information level, the total drop from their level to the lowest-level employees was only 21 percentage points. In the other organizations where managers needed to carry more of the news burden, the drop in information level was nearly double that – 37 percentage points. And most of that

drop occurred between directors and managers.

Making the most of briefings

Although our research shows that team briefings are not the most efficient or effective way to broadcast information about company plans (or many other subjects), they certainly do have a role to play in gaining acceptance and changing behaviors.

A cascade can also be effective for a single topic or event if it is planned with the precision of a military campaign, with ways of confirming that each step in the cascade has occurred.

For example, if you were communicating a major reduction in staff, you would have the initial meeting with all managers who are going to conduct meetings. Then 30 minutes after the meeting ends, they would all have meetings with their staff. After each staff meeting, the manager could be required to fill out a form about the meeting and the unanswered questions his/her employees had. These questions can then be consolidated, with answers provided, and sent back to the managers for follow-up meetings.

So, when team briefings are the right thing to do, here are some ideas on how to measure their effectiveness.

Pretesting materials

Before bringing together a large number of senior managers to brief them on some key information, pretest the presentation and the collateral material you plan to use with a small group of managers.

- Have them review the agenda, the amount of time spent on different aspects of the meeting, whether there is enough opportunity for them to interact with senior management and



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with their peers to discuss the implications of the news, etc.

- Check to see if the collateral information provides enough or too much detail, and if the materials you give them will be easy to adapt for the meetings they will be conducting with their staff. This way, you still have a chance to incorporate key learnings into the initial launch. Many communicators wait to measure the effectiveness of meetings until after they have occurred, when it's too late to change or improve what has already happened.

Measure impact of each meeting

A very brief survey can be administered at the beginning of the first meeting in a cascade to gather a baseline of what the managers currently know about the topic to be discussed, and how they feel about it.

For example, you might ask a true-false or multiple-choice question on some key piece of knowledge you'll be covering, and then a 5-point agree-disagree question on the order of: "I believe the company can successfully achieve goal X," where goal X is the outcome the meeting's topic is intended to help achieve.

At the end of the meeting, you ask the same two survey questions to measure how much the initial meeting has improved managers' knowledge on your key topic, and how much it has influenced managers' attitudes about the company's ability to succeed.

The second survey can also ask some behavior questions about how easy they think this information will be to discuss with others (showing how comfortable they are with their knowledge level and how helpful your briefing meeting/materials were), and how likely they are to share this information with their staff in a team briefing, and by what date.

Tracking results for all

To see how effective the actual cascade is, I would also ask the two questions on knowledge and attitude of all employees (or a random sample if you have a large population) just before you launch a particular cascade. I would then repeat those questions after the deadline you have established for the last cascade meeting to be conducted. For example, if you expect managers to conduct staff meetings at least once a month, 31 days would be a good gap between surveys.

In the second survey, I would also ask employees if their manager has discussed the key topic in a team briefing yet. If the answer is "yes," ask if the manager used the specific tools you provided for the cascade, such as talking points. By having respondents also identify

their business unit or location, you can track where the cascade has actually occurred.

The cascade is not a waterfall

Whoever first came up with the term "cascade" for what happens to information flowing from level to level in an organization, must have had in mind the image of a waterfall rushing full force from top to bottom, with virtually nothing lost along the way. Unfortunately, information flowing through an organization doesn't feel the same pull of gravity that water does.

A more accurate water analogy we should all be thinking of as we plan our next cascade would be the Panama or Suez canals: We need to figure out how we can push our information past a series of highly resistant locks. scm

Figure One: Two organizations purposefully relying on team-briefing cascades, no mass media

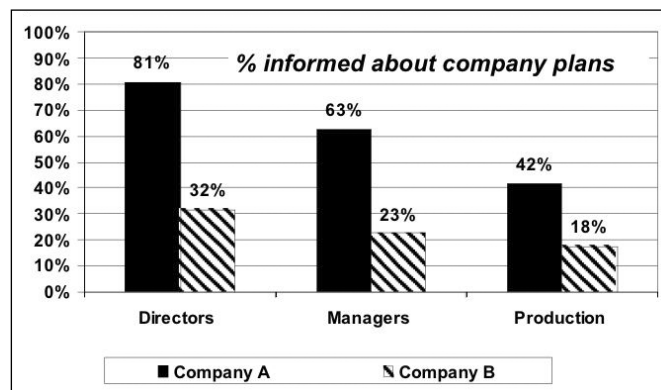
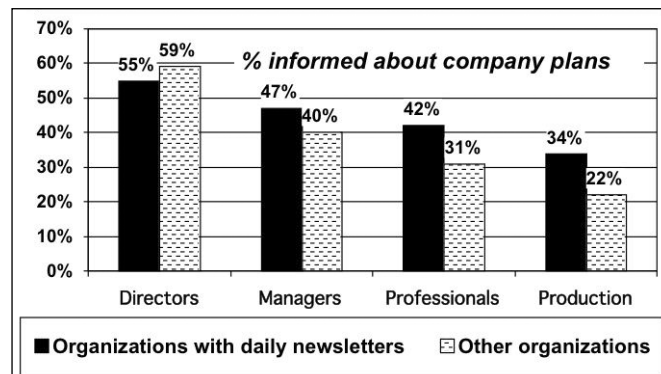


Figure Two: Impact of having speedy mass communication vs. relying on cascade



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