Q: How can you quantify "communication noise" and its impact?

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There isn't enough room on two pages to offer ways of quantifying all the different types of noise mentioned in the rest of this issue, or their impact, but a selection is provided below.

Measuring Noise from Messages

Conflicting stated messages. First, identify with top management what the accurate key messages are on the most critical business topics. Second, regardless of whether you're responsible for internal or external communication, collect all the different communications over the past six to 12 months about those topics to all audiences. Third, using a different highlighter pen for each topic area, mark each written statement that either agrees or disagrees with the accurate key messages identified in the first step. Fourth, create a matrix with row and column headings similar to those in Exhibit One. Finally, tackle one "color" at a time and count the number of statements that are either consistent or inconsistent with the accurate key messages for each audience. Use the information you find to complete the matrix.

The reason for collecting all internal *and* external communications is that many conflicts occur when people responsible for communicating with different audiences purposely or accidentally "spin" the information differently. Yet, employees will also learn about information sent to customers or reporters, and external audiences will also learn about information sent to employees when they interact with one another.

Stated versus observed messages ("do" versus "say"). While conducting the message content analysis above, you could also track the number of the reported decisions or actions of the senior leadership team that are consistent or inconsistent with the key messages. (See the bottom rows of Exhibit One.) Also track how consistent organizational policies and processes are with the messages. For example, an executive decision that is consistent with the message of "great customer service" would be expanding the hours of a customer call center. An inconsistent policy might be an incentive program in the call center that rewards a high volume of short calls with customers without any quality measure for resolution of customer issues. An inconsistent work process might be that customer complaints are not communicated by customer service employees to the operational employees who could change the actions that customers are complaining about.

Another measure would be to ask your audience on a survey to what extent they believe a message has been communicated versus how frequently they observe actions consistent with that message. For example, you might ask employees how well the senior leadership team has communicated the importance of customer service and how frequently senior leaders' decisions and actions reflect the importance of customer service, or to what extent the organization's

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policies and practices support excellent customer service. Customers could be asked similar questions from their perspective.

Measuring Noise from Communication Channels

Using an inappropriate channel for a message. Using the right-hand side of the grid in Exhibit One, you may find that some of the channels used for a particular message are simply the wrong ones due to the limitations of a channel. Count those within the grid as "misuse of channel." This often occurs when content owners use the channels that are most convenient for themselves rather than most useful for their audiences. For example, an executive may send a voicemail to direct reports about the hiring of several new staff members, and ask them to pass on the information to their staffs. Unless every employee can receive a forwarded voicemail, many managers will now need to either take notes from the voicemail and repeat it in a meeting or write memos of their own. The results will be that many will either pass it on incorrectly, creating message noise, or neglect to pass it on at all. Another reason for inappropriateness might be using a non-visual channel for a highly visual topic, or using a visual medium for purely verbal information (the proverbial "talking head").

Yet another inappropriate use would be sending multiple messages at once through a channel that forces people to hear in a linear way versus being able to skim. For example, if there are several topics to communicate, not all of which will be of use to every audience member, they could skim headlines to find what they need through a print or electronic channel but not through a voicemail or meeting where they would be forced to hear about each topic in order. Audience members may either hang up too soon on a voicemail or mentally check out of a meeting.

Redundancy of too many channels for identical messages. While conducting a content analysis on the consistency of key messages, analyze to what extent the messages were appropriately reinforced in different channels versus inappropriately. For example, on a particular topic, appropriate reinforcement might be to use an e-mail to alert your audience to the "headlines" of a topic, a print or electronic "publication" to document detailed facts and figures for future reference, a video to show graphic elements that make the topic more meaningful to the audience, and meetings in which work groups become involved in discussing how they will implement the topic.

Inappropriate redundancy that simply causes noise might be nearly identical articles in the corporate-wide publication and a business unit publication followed by speaking points for managers to use in one-way presentations to their employees that don't provide any localization or opportunity for dialogue.

Overwhelming volume through a single channel. While a channel may be very useful, if it is abused with a heavy flow information not perceived to be useful to most audience members, your audience may not notice really important messages buried in that channel. Examples include paper memos, e-mails, electronic bulletin boards and broadcast voicemails. You could save a week or a month's worth of all-employee e-mails or memos coming into your "in-box" and analyze them using a grid like that in Exhibit Two.

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Measuring Impact of Noise

Once you identify and quantify the noise itself, estimate the amount of time wasted by each audience member having to plod through unnecessary noise. For employees, multiply that time by the average pay level to identify the cost of lost productivity.

For inconsistent messages, identify the potential business impact of an inconsistency. An extreme example was a health care company in the US that printed and communicated through two different sales forces two different versions of how a proposed new health plan in Florida was to work—one to the doctors and hospitals they were signing up as providers and one to the employers who would offer the plan to their employees. Once the serious inconsistency was identified, neither the providers nor employers wanted to participate in the plan because the company had lost credibility. The result was that the plan was never offered, all the Florida employees were laid off, and all the time and materials costs of the start-up had been wasted.

Exhibit One: Example of Noise Assessment on Customer Service Messages

	NOISE FROM CONTENT INCONSISTENCY			NOISE FROM MESSAGE/CHANNEL MISMATCH		
	Consistent Messages	**Inconsistent Messages**	**Examples of Inconsistencies**	**Good Use of Channel**	**Misuse of Channel**	**Examples of Channel Misuse**
Employee Channels						
Newsletter						
E-mails						
Video						
Bulletin boards						
Intranet						
Customer Channels						
Sales Brochure						
Letters						
Web site						
Mass Media						
Website						
Organization Actions						
Executive decisions						
Policies						
Work processes						

Exhibit Two: Noise from Overuse of a Channel

In-Box Item #	#1	#2	#3	#4	Total
Unclear Action	✓		✓	✓	3
Disorganized		✓			1
Jargon	✓				1
Doublespeak			✓		1
Too Long	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Wrong Medium		✓			1
Too formal	✓				1
Too informal					0

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