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HOW TO SELL YOUR COMMUNICATION PLAN TO MANAGEMENT

BY ANGELA D. SINICKAS

It never fails. You come up with an idea guaranteed to improve communication. You write it up and give it to your boss. The idea either dies immediately or is sent to higher management to die more slowly.

The kicker to this scenario is that some time later during a layoff or organizing attempt, your organization's president will demand of your boss, who will demand of you, why you haven't already implemented some communication plan to help solve the company's current problem. Bewildered, you reach into your desk drawer and brush off a dusty file with your original idea intact and untried.

You change the date and resubmit your idea. It is accepted and a budget is immediately made available, but you appear to have reacted to your organization's needs rather than proactively planned for future needs. You lose and the company loses.

If this sounds at all familiar, take comfort that at least you are not alone and change is possible. Four years ago, just after being hired by my current employer, I proposed replacing a single employee magazine published about eight times a year with a program combining a weekly newsletter, a quarterly magazine, a publication for managers only, a system of meetings between different levels of employees and a research instrument to measure the effectiveness of these programs. The idea never found its way into the company's planning process. The plan went into a file. It got dusty.

Now, four years later, each of those programs is operating. The staff has increased from one communicator to four, and the budget has doubled—all during a recession that seriously affected revenues.

What made the difference between concept and reality was a carefully thought-out selling strategy and a readiness to grasp any opportunity that presented it-

self. In my case, the company decided to build a new, heavily automated production plant and move half our employees there. That presented the first opportunity to show that communication can measurably affect the bottom line. Visible successes were rewarded by additional staff and budget to expand the progress.

Opportunities may or may not present themselves at convenient times, but selling your ideas is a process that can be learned and used at any time.

Do Your Homework

The key first step is to talk to the highest level manager you're on informal terms with to find out what the planning process includes at your organization:

1) Who are the key players? Do only the top levels of management plan the organization's future, or is planning a participatory process including many levels of managers and specialists? Does a separate department devote itself to planning? Are there planners who are more key than their titles might suggest?

2) When is planning done? Does your organization begin strategic planning in the spring, operational planning in the summer and budgeting in the fall? Whatever the timing, your communication planning should correspond for it to be considered and approved.

Read Your Organization's Plans

Ask your own manager or the director of your department if you can read through the organization's written plans (usually strategic and operating). These will almost certainly be confidential, but take notes on some key points:

1) Be particularly aware of the jargon used by your organization. If the plan talks about a needs analysis, realize that you should refer to a leadership survey or communication audit the same way. Learn the difference between operating income

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and profit, objectives and goals, plans and strategies, months and periods, and fiscal year and calendar year.

2) Faithfully record the format of an operating action plan. If your plans don't fit the format, they are sure to be ignored. An action plan usually includes:

- a title
- an objective
- which corporate strategies it relates to
- itemized steps to be taken, with their start and finish dates
- the person responsible for achieving the plan, and
- the estimated cost.

3) The most important thing to look for in the plans, however, are particular action plans affecting the bottom line where results can be enhanced by effective communication. These are the opportunities you can make for yourself. For example, productivity or safety improvement programs are far more successful if thoughtful communication planning is built into them. (See IABC Communication Bank files.)

Write Your Department's Plan

The easiest way to become part of the organization's planning process and to gain credibility for yourself and your plans is to volunteer to coordinate, write and polish your department's operating plan. Chances are if your department director is not much of an organizer or writer, you'll be greeted enthusiastically. Once you've seen the process from the inside out, you'll be ready to do your own communication planning and sell it more effectively to the real decision-makers.

Formulate Your Strategic Plan

Once you've read the organization's strategic plan, follow the same format, although much scaled down in size, for your own. Knowing what the organization wants to become (its mission) and the strategies it will employ to achieve that mission, determine with your manager how communication may play a role in those plans.

Sell Your Strategies

When you and your manager agree that your three- or four-page strategic communication plan looks and sounds



like the company's and that it reflects the company's goals, you are ready to sell it to top management. If at all possible, don't just send a written plan "upstairs." Try to get an appointment to walk each decision-maker through your plan so you can see whether it is being understood or if you need to shift your emphasis. Depending on your individual organization, that may mean convincing only your president or a management committee or every vice president individually.

As you present your proposals—at this stage purposely theoretical without many definite actions—solicit the decision-makers' involvement. Stress that you want to help them achieve their desired results. Ask what you can do for them. Once their involvement is secured, their commitment to your future specific programs is far more likely.

Audit Employee Needs

Now that you've gotten management input, you need employee participation, whether through a formal communication audit or through a series of meetings with employees. Find out what subjects they're interested in, how informed they currently feel about those

subjects, and what their current and preferred sources of information are.

Selling the audit concept should be part of your strategic plan approval process. Stress that you are so certain your plans will positively affect company plans that you want to be measured on an objective basis. The audit will determine baselines for information and interest levels on issues crucial to the company's success. Re-auditing after your plan is implemented will show numerically whether your communication has increased employees' interest and information levels in these subjects, and if you are now using information sources that they prefer for each subject. Most managers will take you up on your offer to be evaluated objectively. They are inherently uncomfortable measuring you on whether they like your writing style.

Formulate Action Plans

Once your strategic plan is approved and you've solicited employee input, it's time to devise a detailed, scheduled and costed-out operating plan together with others who will be involved in carrying out the plans. Make sure the plans are realistic and that you can achieve them. Be prepared to justify all your recommendations with objective data.

Sell Your Operating Plan

Using the techniques that were most effective in selling your strategic plan, explain to each key decision-maker what the audit results showed about operating plans in his or her area of responsibility. After describing all the problems the audit identified, explain how your communication plan will help to solve those shortcomings. Ask if there are any concerns you have not yet addressed. Solicit ideas for further refinement of your plan and incorporate good ones.

By this time, management will feel that it is their communication plan. Congratulations on a successful sale! ■

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