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FEEDBACK

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Global research and training for internal communicators

OPINION: COMMUNICATION MEASUREMENT

A slavish stare at
the bottom line

Angela Sinickas, president of communications consultancy, Sinickas Communications Inc., puts forward the argument that measurably effective communication is necessary as a means to help employees understand the "right things to do" in their organization.

Some communicators say their work can't be measured, and some even say that communication *shouldn't* be quantified. On a survey I conducted this year about the value of my columns on measurement for *Strategic Communication Management*, one communicator wrote in: "Each article is well written and conceived. And the ingenuity in operationalizing organizational variables is impressive. But the ethos across Sinickas' work on communication in organizations is a little distasteful. I'm sure the slavish focus on the organization's bottom-line concerns makes for effective consultancy, but it disrespects the humans who invest so much of their lives therein."

Disrespectful to humans?

Before starting my own consultancy in 2000, I worked for 26 years in large organizations, including a university, two corporations and two global consulting firms. I learned quickly that if the bottom line for an organization – even a non-profit one – isn't healthy, people get laid off. To me, that's the ultimate disrespect an organization can show to its humans – shutting off their income and ripping them away from a major source of self-worth and friendship with little or no warning.

Expecting employees to provide value for the pay they receive seems reasonable to

me. Unfortunately, many employees don't understand well enough how the day-to-day decisions they make and the actions they take on the job can either improve that bottom line or hurt it.

That's where I think measurably effective communication enters the picture. We can help employees understand the right things to do. When they do those things, not only does the organization benefit, but so do they. They are more likely to continue having jobs in the first place, and are more likely to experience personal success in terms of pay increases and promotions if they're doing the right things. I see nothing disrespectful or slavish in measuring how well we can help that happen.

Distasteful ethos?

I see great value in having communicators measure the impact of communication on the success of employees and the company. I see it as a highly ethical, win-win situation. Using communication to measurably improve safety certainly helps the bottom line – but it also saves human lives. The success of various communication approaches to

"If you find a silo mentality developing, form a 'Change Coalition'."

Lorri Lennon, page 10

dealing with this issue must be measured in order to save more lives using the most effective approaches.

I think that even the softer elements of working in an organization, for "the humans who invest so much of their lives therein", need to be measured. For example, research has shown that having more engaged employees results in greater productivity and less staff turnover – in short, a better bottom line. Because management and shareholders have an obligation to care greatly about the bottom line, we need to demonstrate to them through measurement why paying attention to the human elements will help them get the financial results they crave.

Communicators prove their worth

I would hate to go back to the 1950s and '60s when the communication department was seen as that fun place to work where all the creative types with English and liberal arts degrees hang out to plan parties and take cute pictures of birthdays, babies and bowling trophies.

In those days, when budgets got tight, communicators were the first to lose their jobs since what they contributed was "nice to have" instead of a critical business function. In the last decade or so, I've seen communicators hang on to their jobs through

lean economic times – I think because they've demonstrated that much of what they do has made a financial contribution to the bottom line.

Balancing people and numbers

How do communicators balance the human and financial elements in our work? I think we start by clearly showing the connection between the business information we communicate and the lives of our employees.

Instead of pontificating about the organization's strategy, we need to make it relevant by giving examples of how employees in different units or job functions can help the strategy succeed, and how it benefits them to do so. Rather than stupefying employees with too many financial results, we should use the results as a springboard for recognizing the people who helped achieve that success, and communicating how their efforts staved off a plant closing or led to a larger contribution to the employee profit-sharing plan.

When we communicate business information in a human way, we're more likely to achieve the business results we're hoping for, both for the organization and its people. And what's wrong with demonstrating to management through measurement how much impact we had in creating that success?

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INTERNAL COMMS GROUP ON THE COMMUNICATORS' NETWORK

PI

Q: Does anyone know of a clearing house or central source for all the best company to work for contests? The number and variations of these awards have exploded the past few years, including the original Great Places to Work Institute that's affiliated with Fortune magazine, Best Employers for Workers Over 50, Best IT Employers, Best Employers in _____ (Fill in the blank for geography), Best Employers for Working Mothers and so on. One of my clients is interested in reviewing the entire list of award options. If anyone knows of a clearing house or other ideas, I'll be glad to compile.

A: There

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