

# Yes, We've Heard About the Cascade. But Is It Always the Best Tactic?

***Research is the only way to find out which cascade method works for your employees, says Angela Sinickas.***

Most communicators agree on the importance of face-to-face communication. But many disagree on whether the team-briefing “cascade” – where information is trickled from senior management to the lowest-level employee – is the most effective way to impart knowledge.

I've mined my survey database for some research to see how well the cascade process works. As part of this, I studied two organisations who are at the extreme of how they use the cascade. At the time of my research, these two organisations both relied on the cascade as their primary source of employee communication. Both had no newsletters, and only primitive out-of-date intranets. Mass e-mails were rarely used, and

generally only for bad news.

- **Organisation A** had very highly informed directors who heard about company goals directly from the senior leadership team every month. Information began to be lost when it came to the managers they were supposed to share that information with. Here, there was a drop in understanding of nearly 20 percentage points. A further 20 percentage points were lost in

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the next transmission, to non-managerial employees.

- **Organisation B** had a CEO who said he expected his vice presidents to share information from leadership meetings with their staff. However, 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.

In both Organisations – A and B – the level of information for the lowest-level employees was about half of what it was for director-level management.

*What happens when an organisation relies on mass communication instead of the cascade?*

We looked at the database again to see how information levels varied in organisations that relied

on daily newsletters to inform employees. In three organisations with daily newsletters, the average drop in information levels was much less noticeable than in the other organisations that relied heavily on the cascade to pass along timely information.

The differences are fairly 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 organisations 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.

- **Organisation C**, which formerly had strong mass communications, tried to make

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leaders more accountable for cascading communication on key subjects instead – with disastrous results. On the topic of financial results, there used to be a drop in information from top to bottom levels of only 30 points; using the cascade, the drop increased to 42 points. The non-managers' information level was only 39% of that of the senior managers using the cascade, when it used to be 58%. The saddest drop was at the manager level: 64% used to be informed about financial results, but using the cascade only 36% were.

### ***Don't over-rely on the cascade***

Our research shows that team briefings are not the most efficient or effective way to broadcast information about company plans, or indeed other subjects. However, they certainly do have a role to play in gaining acceptance and changing

behaviour. A cascade can also be effective for a single topic or event, but it needs military-like planning – with ways to verify 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.

**When you're organising a team briefing cascade, here are some**

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ideas on how to measure their effectiveness:

### *1) Pre-test your materials.*

Before you gather a large number of senior managers to brief them on some key information, pre-test your presentation and collateral material with a small group of managers. Have them review the agenda, and tell you whether the amount of time spent on different aspects of the meeting is correct.

Check to see if the collateral information provides too little 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. 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.

### *2) Measure the impact of each individual 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. 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.

The second survey can also ask some behaviour 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 and materials were. This also tells you how likely they are to share this information with their staff in a team briefing.

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### **3) Tracking results for all.**

To see how effective the actual cascade is, I would run a survey on the topic right before and immediately after you launch a cascade. 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 identify their business unit, you can track where the cascade has occurred.

Remember - 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 organisation, must have had in mind the image of a waterfall rushing full force from top to bottom, with little lost along the way. Unfortunately, information

flowing through an organisation doesn't feel the same pull of gravity that water does.

A more accurate water analogy 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. ■

*Angela Sinickas is president of Sinickas Communications Inc, an award-winning international consulting firm that has worked with 25% of the Forbes largest 100 global companies. Angela wrote the manual 'How to Measure Your Communication Programs'. A longer version of this article originally appeared in Melcrum's SCM magazine. You can follow Angela at [www.sinicom.com](http://www.sinicom.com).*

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