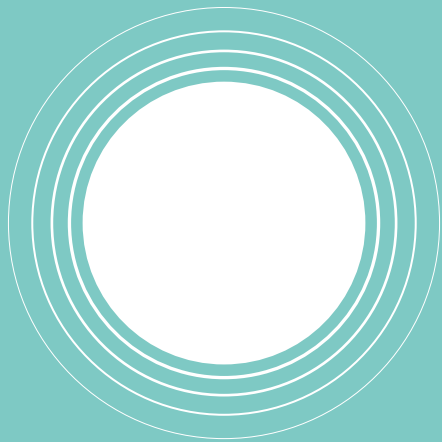
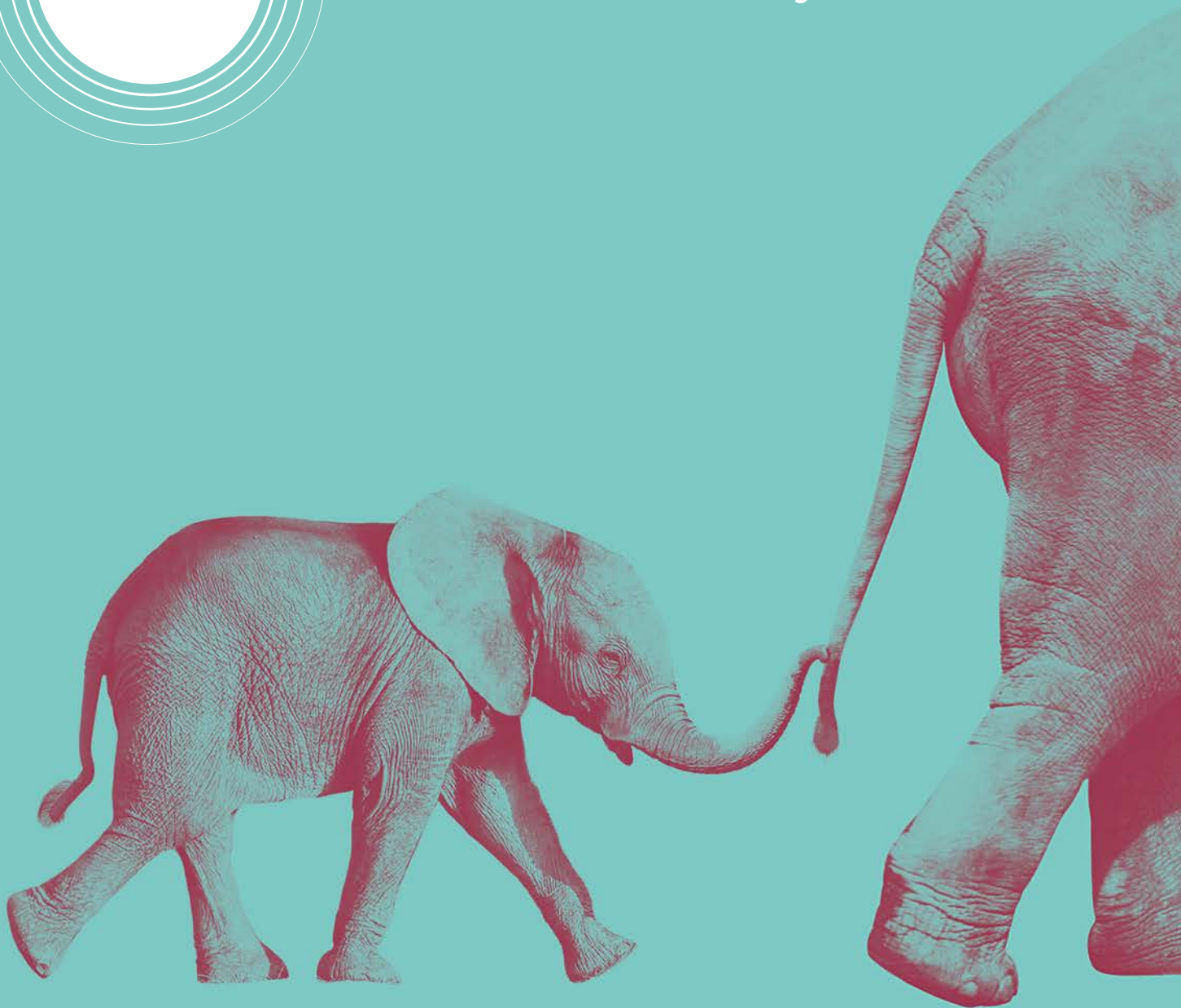


A global report



How Internal Communicators can help leaders communicate and engage more effectively



by

h&h





Title: How Internal Communicators can help leaders communicate and engage more effectively

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In the interests of fairness and respect for our wonderful global community, we've opted to keep local spelling variants throughout this article.

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h&h



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**Michael
Hargreaves**

Marketing
Coordinator

H&H

In the opening of *Engaging for Success*, MacLeod and Clarke's seminal investigation into the impact of employee engagement on organisational results, the then-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills Peter Mandelson wrote, 'The lessons that flow from that evidence can and should shape the way leaders and managers in both the private and public sectors think about the people who work for them'.

It's safe to say his words remain just as, if not more, relevant today as they were when the report was published almost a decade ago. Although the concept of employee engagement had been loosely bandied about prior to its publication, MacLeod and Clarke's revealing and critical research lifted the lid on just how powerful engagement can be when done properly – and highlighted the importance of senior leaders and line managers in making it happen.

Now, 10 years on, and with countless other research papers and quantitative data at our disposal, we're all even more aware of what drives employee engagement than we already were. And one enabler that consistently stands out amongst the engagement crowd – is leadership communication.

IC professionals will know that the history of organisational communication is the history of change. *Engaging for Success* was published – by instruction of the UK government – in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, prompting a reconsidered approach to business productivity with a much greater focus on boosting engagement to help spur on economic recovery.

And more recently, further political and economic turmoil on the world stage – the rise of populism in the UK, US and parts of Continental Europe, the evolution of automation and machine-learning technology, and Britain's vote to leave the European Union – has left employees around the globe feeling uncertain and anxious about the future, requiring senior leaders to step up to the plate and provide reassurance and direction to shore up morale.

How ironic then, that one of the primary constants standing in the way of internal-communications success amidst all this dramatic change, is the one thing that's required to make sense of it all for employees?

In workplaces across the globe, senior leaders and managers are falling short of the mark when it comes to communicating with employees. It's no surprise that the 'frozen middle' – characterised by a lack of line manager communication skills – has been rated as the biggest challenge by industry practitioners for six years straight¹.

And it's even more staggering that only 13% of employees strongly agree that their senior leaders communicate effectively with the rest of the organisation².

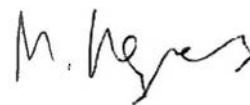
This data paints a grim picture of the reality facing IC professionals – shape up your leaders, or watch engagement and productivity grind to a halt.

In the midst of all this doom and gloom though, there is a hope. 'Senior leadership' is now the 3rd-biggest global engagement opportunity³ (up from ranking 7th in 2016). And for a number of years, improving senior leadership communication has been a top priority for internal communicators⁴. Does this perhaps suggest that we, as an industry, have been consistently ahead of the game when it comes to confronting this significant challenge?

There was even more good news last year too, when CIPR Inside's Making It Count report revealed that 92% of senior leaders either understand, are on board with or appreciate the importance of internal communication as a strategic business function. And this year's State of the Sector report revealed that 96% of practitioners think the line managers in their organisations are very or reasonably visible and approachable.

With the increasing need for senior leaders and line managers to up their communication game, and the coveted seat at the top table now seemingly within the internal communicator's grasp, there's never been a better time to drill down and tackle the issue head-on. So we thought we'd do our bit by uncovering and collating the cream of the industry crop of strategies, tactics and helpful advice from those on the front lines on how you can transform your leaders and managers into truly exceptional communicators.

I hope this report inspires you to play your part in making this happen in your own organisation, and that it serves as a useful and practical guide to help steer you in the right direction – so that you can successfully shape your leaders up for the future.



Michael Hargreaves
Marketing Coordinator
H&H

¹ Gatehouse, *State of the Sector*

² Gallup (2017)

³ Aon Hewitt (2017)

⁴ Gatehouse, *State of the Sector*

How can Internal Communicators help in giving senior leaders and line managers the skills and knowledge to communicate and engage more effectively?





This report is a golden melting pot of insights that brings together the very best in advice, strategies and best practice to help you support and coach your senior leaders and line managers in developing and enhancing their communication skills.

Along the way you'll hear from industry peers based in the UK, Sweden, Argentina, the Netherlands, Canada, Latvia, South Africa, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, India, America and Spain – giving you a sweeping look into the thoughts and opinions of practitioners in different parts of the world.

To make it easier for you to digest the wealth of leadership communication insights and ideas included in this report, we've grouped the responses by theme, and shaped these into a helpful narrative of key strategies to give you a clear sense of the direction you should take when supporting your senior leaders and managers in becoming expert communicators.

Strategy 1: Highlighting the importance of internal communications and employee engagement to organisational success

Strategy 2: Encouraging leaders and managers to listen to and act on employee needs

Strategy 3: Putting steps in place to increase leadership authenticity

Strategy 4: Training and coaching leaders and managers by offering advice, data and tools

Strategy 5: Providing support with turning messages into communications that get results

Many of the contributions touch on more than one theme, but we've taken care to distinguish them by their main area of focus so it's as simple as possible for you to browse and take in.

So without further ado, we'll hand you over to our expert contributors...

Highlighting
the importance
of internal
communications
and employee
engagement
to organisational
success





**Ellie
Buckingham**

Communications
Consultant

Lily Rose Writes

To add real value to the business, internal communications should be strategic as well as tactical.

One of the ways internal communicators can help senior leaders and managers to communicate more effectively is to show, and prove, to them that internal comms can actively help the business achieve its strategic goals.

A great way to do this is to give them the company's story, and coach them to share it effectively.

A leader should be able to simply and engagingly explain to their team where the business has been, where it's going, how it's getting there, and how they play a part in it.

Once you've given leaders and managers these tools and skills, they can use them to reinforce messages and explain the "why" to the "what" to engage employees in the organisation's journey – from the tough stuff like change, to the business as usual like financial returns.



Hamida Bhatia

Digital Marketing
& Communications
Consultant

Google

Build a trusted relationship with your leaders and managers. This will give you the bedrock from which to coach, develop and inspire your leaders to communicate effectively. Great communicators are not born; it's a skill that can be learnt and perfected, and you can help them do that.

Get your managers and leaders as excited and passionate about communications as you are by sharing what good communications looks like. Give feedback to increase their confidence.



**Great communicators
are not born; it's
a skill that can be
learnt and perfected."**

Provide them with the structures and frameworks to package and personalise messages into relatable stories which they can communicate themselves. Be supportive with their communications planning when they need help.

And finally, be comfortable with some imperfections – it's what makes us human, and gives us an approachable personality when engaging with others.



Helen Bissett

Managing Director

H&H

You can't give skills and knowledge to someone who doesn't want them. There has to be *desire* before the motivation to learn is triggered. So as Simon Sinek says, it needs to start with 'why', rather than 'how' or 'what'.

Build intrinsic motivation by painting the bigger picture for leaders. Spell out what's in it for them, their people and the organisation as a whole if they invest in communication excellence. And for good measure, throw in a bit of extrinsic motivation too! (although this requires a joined-up approach across the organisation).

Furthermore, people naturally focus on what's being measured. So lobby to have communication and engagement capability elevated as a primary KPI. When communication capability is part of a leader's targeted outcomes and a tangible measure of their success... then the desire to learn will start positively burning.



Brad Whitworth

Senior Internal
Communications
Manager

Hitachi Vantara

Sadly, there's no magic formula. Most importantly, leaders must want to become better communicators. Sometimes they have that inner drive toward perfection, and other times the communicator must use encouragement (and data) to inspire action.

Like T-shirts, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Do they need to improve face-to-face communication, or written? Do they learn better with one-on-one coaching over time, or in an immersive day-long training class? Communicators must tailor a plan to fit the individual.

In my experience, the key is to establish an open relationship where you can discuss the leader's strengths and weaknesses, and agree upon a custom plan.



Marc do Amaral

Corporate
& Change
Communication
Specialist

SPUP

If IC professionals can't help leaders communicate effectively with employees, then who can? In practice though, it's often not so easy. Managers tend to think of internal communicators as people endowed with a special creative gift, one that uniquely allows them, as the druids of our time, to get into the heads of other people. Why burden oneself with such a role?

It thus begins with changing the narrative. Start the conversation by asking managers how they feel about team communication. What is going well, and what could improve?

Use these conversations to provide practical assistance but also to reveal assumptions about how communication works. At some point you will make them grasp that communication is more about listening to people and engaging with them than it is about messaging.

Once the perception has changed, the rest is easy. Leaders will be far more susceptible to your potential as a trusted adviser and coach. Just ask what they need and take it from there. Think strategically. That's how you will know which tactics to deploy: from toolkits and talking points, to training and coaching.



Rich Baker

Communications
Manager

Jaguar Land Rover

Providing solid evidence of the ROI of internal communication helps to emphasise the benefits. Then it's about having a good enough relationship to work with them to develop their skills.

The most important skill for any leader who wants to build on their communication skillset is to have the confidence to try something new. Great leaders today have authenticity and build trust by being open and honest. You'd think that was easy, but some leaders are not used to bringing their whole selves to work.

I've found that like most things, little successes can be a catalyst for big successes, and so building on the momentum is important.

Developing a comms plan can help here, and will help to drive continuous improvement through conscious practice and feedback.

In summary, I think there's always skills transfer as a choice, but before any of that can happen, we have to turn leaders on to the possibilities. And make it rewarding!



**Hannah
Thoresby**

Creative Director

H&H

The most important thing first of all is to open senior leaders' eyes to the importance of communication, and the benefits it can bring.

Demonstrate how IC can support them to keep their teams engaged. Earn their respect by becoming a trusted advisor. Be proactive in approach, rather than reactive. Share concrete plans (with top-line milestones, not excessive detail), and provide meaningful tools and resources which they can adapt to suit specific teams.

Set clear expectations. Provide them with innovative ways to quickly and easily stimulate discussion and encourage feedback. And lastly – provide necessary communications training and development!



**Catherine
Milward-Bridges**

Director

The Air Quotes Project

Rather than viewing this as something internal communicators should undertake entirely off their own backs, perhaps it should be treated as a collaborative exercise instead?

IC professionals need to communicate the need for employee engagement to leaders (and proffer practical suggestions). This should be done in the context of resultant employee output and company profits.

Leaders, on the other hand, need to accept their responsibility towards the workforce, and present their humanity through regular and effective communication (prioritising it, like they would communication with the board).

Employee engagement is no longer a nice-to-have in any business that views itself as future-fit. And internal communicators need to demonstrate the confidence coherent with this stance in their interaction with senior leaders.



Alejandro Formanchuk

Director

Formanchuk & Asociados

(President - The Argentinian
Internal Communication
Association / Director - Ibero-
American Internal
Communication Federation)

To help senior leaders, I think that it might be convenient for us to first change our job roles, and stop being seen as 'IC Managers', instead becoming 'IC Articulators'. I have always thought that the best thing that could ever happen to internal communication would be for it to cease being the self-contained function of the IC team, and start being owned by the entire organisation.

In order to make all senior leaders understand that they are the principal internal communicators and must improve their communication skills, I begin with this fact: nobody quits their job because they did not like an article in the company newsletter, or because the internal social network takes too long to load, or because the pictures used in notice boards are of poor quality. What makes you choose to stay at a company is not what you read in a message, but what you see in your leader.



The best thing that could ever happen to internal communication would be for it to cease being the self-contained function of the IC team, and start being owned by the entire organisation.

Encouraging
leaders and
managers to listen
to and act on
employee needs





Dr Kevin Ruck
Owner & Director
PR Academy



Advise leaders to be themselves, use less (or no) slides, and adopt an informal communication approach."

My research with employees suggests that senior leaders are not very visible, and rarely communicate with them face-to-face. Employees told me that they want senior leaders to talk to them about plans, progress, change, and priorities, as illustrated by the following point from one particular employee I interviewed: *'to me, communicating things is the core task of leadership teams – and it's their job to make the content of the communication understandable'*.

Employees also told me that they relate better with their leaders when communication is undertaken in a relaxed environment. They were complimentary about times when the communication is more of a conversation with an open question-and-answer format, and less of a formal presentation with slides.

So, the first thing for IC professionals to do is to encourage senior leaders to allocate more time to talking with employees. And then we should advise them to be themselves, use less (or no) slides, and adopt an informal communication approach.



Krishan Lathigra
Head of Internal
Communication
Department for Exiting
the European Union

More than anything, ensure that your senior leaders understand the mood of employees at any given time. By knowing the reality for those on the front line, they will be able to engage more effectively, and with empathy.

**Martin Flegg**

Internal
Communications
Manager

University of Bradford



Internal communicators are well-connected and have a cross-cutting view of what is happening across organisational silos."

In internal comms, we often talk about coaching leaders and managers to communicate with employees in an authentic way. This implies a focus on the delivery of messages, but we should also be helping them to continuously understand employee sentiment and attitudes so that those messages will resonate with the receiver.

Internal communicators occupy a unique position in organisations. We are well-connected and have a cross-cutting view of what is happening across organisational silos, with constant exposure to what employees are thinking and more importantly, doing. We need to find ways to share our understanding of the employee voice with leaders and managers in a structured and actionable way.

When leaders and managers have a better understanding of employee sentiment, the messages they deliver will be heard, resound more strongly and will be more likely to create positive organisational impact.

**Alex Bourgeois**

Social Media
Specialist

Jellyfish Online Marketing

It all starts with data: quantitative and qualitative. How do employees rate internal communications in their organisation? What do employees want to hear from their leaders? How frequently? In what format?

These questions, amongst others, are absolutely crucial. And it's the role of the internal comms team to get the answers. Once leaders have this data, they will be empowered to improve communications and engagement because they will know what employees expect from them.

At the end of the day, internal communicators should be the internal messengers. They sit in the middle between senior leaders and employees – so it's up to them to see that conversations are happening. And when I say conversations, I mean top-down as well as bottom-up!



Victoria Heron

VP Marketing
Communications

**National Nuclear
Laboratory**

It may seem back-to-basics, but being impactful with internal comms is critically dependent on understanding your employees. Being aware of their learning styles and personal drivers, and applying these insights, is more respectful and ultimately more rewarding.

Internal communicators are best-placed to provide this information to senior leaders. For leaders themselves, it's critical that they know their audience and add their own personal touch. Do this, and you'll see the difference!



Dr Frederic Morrison

Course Director &
Lecturer in
Communication

Ulster University

I recently carried out an internal communications audit for a large engineering company. They were specifically concerned about their delivery of crisis-related comms. As part of the project, we assessed general attitudes and beliefs on a number of communication themes, including the perspective of the workforce on communication from the senior management team.

The complex challenge identified in the data related to Trust, Channel and Relevance. Senior management were seen as providing top-down communication on issues that were of little specific relevance to the individual employee, using communication channels the workforce had long since started ignoring!

The fundamental principles of good communication are that it is two-way and of interest to all participants. Consequently, the key assistance that internal communicators can offer is ensuring that messaging from senior management is perceived as addressing the interests of the workforce in a form that is LOCALLY relevant.

In addition, it is vital that communication is crafted in a way that acknowledges other perspectives and concerns. This requires providing an effective means for senior leaders to listen and respond to bottom-up communication from individual employees.

In other words, if you want effective engagement – then effectively engage!



Ann Pilkington

Owner & Director

PR Academy

What employees want from senior leaders and line managers is different. With senior leaders, it is about setting out plans and explaining where the organisation is heading.

But employees also want senior leaders to listen and take their voice seriously. They want to have a say in those plans, and help to set the direction. That is what leads to engagement. Internal comms professionals can help by sharing research and data on employee voice with the senior leadership team to make the business case for listening.

In my personal experience, line managers come in for a lot of unfair criticism in relation to communication, and this is often because they are expected to “sell” a message rather than to help facilitate a two-way conversation. Employees expect their line managers to translate the strategic stuff into actions for their team, whereas they want the big-picture stuff to come from the top of the organisation.



Craig Major

Senior Internal
Communications
Advisor

**Auckland University of
Technology**

My initial thoughts are that leaders should understand that – at least to some degree – there is a separation between management and ‘coalface’ staff (even if it’s just a perceptual separation). For senior leaders to communicate effectively, they should first listen, and actively seek input from staff at all levels about the decisions they have to make. If they can listen well, they can then use these points to explain or justify their decisions with clarity and honesty.

Effective leadership comms are also transparent – leaders shouldn’t try to baffle with BS, or deflect blame. The bitter pill to swallow here is that they will sometimes have to admit shortcomings.

If they can do this in a way that addresses and explains whatever went wrong and proposes a way forward, they will gain greater respect and ultimately strengthen their teams and the overall organisation.

My final point is that leaders should understand the priorities of their staff. For time-poor staff who want to get on with the job, a long-winded waffle about a corporate strategy might not get the cut-through of a short, targeted message that explains how the strategy will help them work more efficiently. All staff – and management in particular – should make their comms as relevant and accessible as they can, to as wide an audience as possible.

**Glenn Grayson**

Internal
Communications
and Engagement
Partner

Missguided



Internal communications as a function doesn't just support an organisation with its own voice; it's about listening, constantly evaluating and shaking up channels to add variety."

At Missguided, we work closely with senior leaders and managers to create authentic (true-to-brand) channels and tools that are derived from employee feedback, enabling them to communicate and engage effectively.

When researching our Vibes (our company values) it was clear from the start that we wanted to emphasise our culture of recognition and praise, and so we provided senior leaders with a simple tool to make this happen. The small gesture of saying 'thank you' or 'well done' doesn't come naturally to some, so we introduced 'Wanna Say' postcards – a collection of cards with messages of praise and celebration that managers can freely pick up, write and deliver to employees.

As a direct action based on colleague feedback, our monthly 'Coffee with the CEO' sessions provide the chance to sit down face-to-face with our founder and CEO, to talk about anything – no agenda, no appointment necessary.

Our 'Dream Big' ideas scheme gives colleagues access to management teams they may not normally work with, allowing them to share suggestions and ideas with senior leaders on a range of subjects including commercial opportunities, website tests and enhancing our customer experience.

Internal communications as a function doesn't just support an organisation with its own voice; it's about listening, constantly evaluating and shaking up channels to add variety, and supporting managers in understanding that one size doesn't fit all when it comes to internal messaging.

**Katie Marlow**

Director &
Communication
Consultant

Little Bird Communication

One of the most important skills for any leader or senior manager is to truly listen. Often, leaders have grown into their roles and have rarely had the time to hone their communication skills. Internal communicators have a huge opportunity to coach and support senior leaders to be brilliant communicators, and to show them the value of listening more, being authentic, and allowing themselves to show humility.

After all, culture is critical to organisations and powerful leaders are the embodiment of their organisation's culture. Great leaders, combined with great communication, create great culture, which in turn means happy and productive employees.

Putting steps in place to increase leadership authenticity





Cathy Power

Global Internal
Communications
Manager

Experian

I think authenticity is key. Don't try to pigeonhole leaders into doing something that isn't in their comfort zone. Find their sweet spot. Build relationships with them to increase trust, and allow for honest conversations.



Saskia Jones

Communications
Consultant and
Coach

Saskia Jones
Communications

2018 is the “Year of Employee Experience”, according to Forbes. With this in mind, organisations should apply principles of customer experience to how they engage and retain employees.

‘Surprise and delight’ is a well-known technique and can be just as effective in employee engagement. It’s about making employees feel valued, included and heard. Three ways internal communicators can support leaders with this are:

- **Show appreciation:** whether it’s on social media, in person, over the phone or via a handwritten note, leaders should lift employees up and show that they care.

- **Make it inclusive:** consider people from every corner of the organisation. Encourage leaders to visit a site, shop or factory and talk about it in their next blog/podcast/leadership video to employees.

- **Give employees a voice:** from live chats on social media to 1:1 sessions with the CEO, find new and creative ways to listen to employees and show how leaders are acting on the results.

**Jim Shaffer**

Leader

The Jim Shaffer Group



Internal communication professionals have an opportunity to help leaders communicate their priorities."

When assuming the role of strategic advisers, internal communication professionals have an opportunity to help leaders communicate their priorities. They can begin by sharing the four behaviors that employees watch for to decide whether leaders are serious or not:

- **How leaders use their time.** Some leaders I've worked with use a monthly calendar review to assess how well their calendar reflects their priorities.
- **What they take the lead on.** Former Motorola CEO Bob Galvin always put 'lean six sigma' first on his leadership team's agenda. He didn't always stay until the meeting was over, but he never left before the 'lean six sigma' discussion had finished.

• **Who and what leaders reward and recognize.** Fred Smith, President and CEO of FedEx, gives 'Bravo Zulu' awards to employees who go above and beyond what's required to help customers. Bravo Zulu is a naval signal which means "well done".

• **The questions they ask.** Irv Hockaday, former CEO of Hallmark Cards, always asked employees two questions, and followed up on each. These were: "What can I do to help you be the best you can be?", and, "What are our customers saying about us?". It was obvious to all Hallmark employees that they, and their customers, were his highest priorities.

**Hannah Claffey**Senior
Communications
Officer

Newport City Homes

Internal communicators should encourage senior leaders to lead from the front. The crucial aspect of top-level comms should be authenticity, and we need to give managers the right tools – whether it's advice, a toolkit or some other form of support – to succeed in communicating authentically with their audience.



Encourage senior leaders to lead from the front. The crucial aspect of top-level comms should be authenticity."



Helen Reynolds

Comms Training
Director

Social For The People

In my experience, rather than thinking about messaging, leaders need to focus on relationship-building, and on becoming liked, known and trusted internally. Internal communicators can inspire leaders and managers to engage employees more effectively by helping them understand their priority audiences better.

Too often the focus for their communication is about what they think the workforce should know. IC professionals can teach them that, actually, audiences of any kind always respond positively to people they relate to.

So by showing that they understand and share their audience's opinions on what they love, hate, want and don't need – senior leaders can appear more in-touch and human.

This can mean simply commenting on how much you also hate hitting traffic on the way into work, or mentioning the amazing caesar salad on offer in the staff café in a blog on the company intranet. It can also be more business-focused – acknowledging (and showing that you too feel) stress during a restructure, or summarising a key policy change in a short video (because nobody has time to read the detailed document!).



Deborah Hinton

Senior Strategic
Communications
Consultant

Phil Communications



Coach leaders and managers, who may be more used to telling, on how to listen and ask great questions."

Great communication is relational. It's a human-to-human endeavour. So, internal communications professionals need to get senior leaders (and managers) out of their offices and into the places where employees, of every kind and on every level, are based.

Accompany them on these expeditions. Use them as an opportunity to coach leaders and managers, who may be more used to telling, on how to listen and ask great questions. The trick of course is that we internal communicators master these skills ourselves. Are you ready for the challenge?



Priya Bates

President


**Inner Strength
Communication Inc.**

At Inner Strength Communication, we encourage a different kind of conversation around engagement. Many focus on programs to drive engagement; however, we focus on systems.

The truth is, people don't engage or disengage because of one incident, or a temporary event or program. We believe true engagement centres around everyday actions and experiences.

We work closely with organizations and leaders to first understand their goals. When employees are engaged, what does business performance look like? What do employees have to do to participate? What do we imagine them saying when they promote the organization? What are they proud of?

When senior leaders are seeking engaged employees, they are looking for solutions that enable and empower their people in a way which also contributes positively to business results. Often, our solutions and strategic plans focus on the simple things they can do every day to connect employees with the organization, and one another.

A large, stylized green leaf graphic with white veins, positioned in the lower half of the page. It serves as a background for a quote.

“Senior leaders are seeking engaged employees, they are looking for solutions that enable and empower their people in a way which also contributes positively to business results.”



Kellie Garrett

CEO

Kellie Garrett Enterprises

Ensure the business strategy is aligned with the espoused desired culture and relentlessly share where actions do and don't match words. Saying you want a transparent culture, and then routinely acting like ostriches, doesn't promote employee engagement.



Per Zetterquist

Communication
& leadership expert,
Coach and Senior
Advisor

Independent

“**Focus on supporting leaders to recognise and understand how they impact people through what they do, and sometimes even more importantly – what they don't do!**”

The number-one thing internal communicators must do is help senior leaders to become truly genuine and authentic in their communication with the organization. And what sends a stronger and more authentic message than our actions?

This means that IC professionals should focus on supporting leaders to recognise and understand how they impact people through what they do, and sometimes even more importantly – what they don't do!

In practice this means helping them to think through the new strategy, or new set of values, in terms of actions: three things they need to start doing, three things they need to do differently, and three things they need to stop doing altogether, so that employees can see, experience and understand the changes to the strategy or the new values that the leadership team want to flourish.

And in doing this exercise, remind your senior leaders of the old saying: *“Your actions speak so loud that I can't hear what you say.”*



Training
and coaching
leaders and
managers
by providing
advice, data
and tools



**Caitlin Kirwan**

Internal
Communications
& Engagement
Manager

DAS UK Group



Messaging and engagement at a local level is critical to getting a consistent message across."

It's all well and good having a solid internal communications strategy and a constant stream of engaging and informative content, but without effective line-manager communications your efforts become relatively futile. 'Central' communications are only one part of the picture, with messaging and engagement at a local level being critical to getting a consistent message across. I believe there are three key steps that internal communicators need to take to encourage effective department-level communications.

Firstly, make expectations clear, and hold managers accountable. Each month at DAS UK Group, we expect all people managers to hold a minimum of one team meeting and one 1:1 meeting with each of their direct reports. It sounds obvious, but I've come across situations where managers simply didn't realise they were supposed to be holding these sessions. These requirements need to be clearly explained to all new managers, and they should be challenged if these sessions aren't taking place.

Secondly, it's really important to provide relevant content to be cascaded, and prompts for local communications. I circulate a monthly management briefing document, which clearly sets out the messaging that needs to be cascaded and provides other content which is just for managers themselves. This ensures consistency of messaging, and also encourages managers to start thinking about local challenges and projects that they need to update their departments on.

Finally, make sure you're on hand to offer managers additional support and guidance when needed. Some might need some additional coaching on how to structure their team meetings, and some might benefit from additional training to help them learn how to handle difficult conversations effectively in 1:1s.

**Rachel Miller**

Director

All Things IC



Internal communicators need to role-model what good looks like, and then coach and stretch leaders."

Want to help senior leaders and line managers communicate and engage effectively? You need to define what that means for your organisation.

Rather than having a generic guide, you need a forensic understanding of the way your business operates, and then you can make tailored recommendations.

Questions to ask include:

- **Where are the communication gaps?**
- **What is working well already?**
- **What skills/channels are priorities?**
- **What do employees think about the current efforts?**
- **Where do leaders need support from the comms team?**
- **What do we need to start/stop/continue?**

I often find there's a failure to communicate expectations, so leaders just muddle through, which benefits no-one.

Internal communicators need to role-model what good looks like, then coach and stretch leaders. You need to be the accountable subject-matter experts to help them to succeed. Provide them with access to your knowledge, couple it with your insights into how your business works, then create opportunities for them to practice and thrive.

Leaders will not be successful communicators without knowing they have the autonomy to make the right choices based on their own style, your culture and their teams. Be the accountable business partners, and offer advice and guidance to enable them to communicate and engage effectively.

**Mike Klein**

Principal

Changing the Terms

The most important thing for us to remember as IC professionals is that we are just that – the professionals.

Why is that important to remember? Because at a certain level, everyone is a communicator. Some leaders and managers rate their own skills highly, while others are particularly uncertain or timid. Our job – as professionals – is to amplify our clients' voices, and align them with organizational intent.

To do that, we need to draft courageously and ambitiously, while at the same time, being prepared to edit comprehensively. We need to stand for the fulfilment of organizational intent – and frame our advice, training and coaching in a way that centers the task at hand in the context of organizational intent. By doing so, we don't just help our leaders to communicate more effectively – we reinforce their perception of our professionalism and value too.

**Jo Bland**

Head of Internal Communications and Engagement

NHS Digital

Having really strong performance metrics that describe what works gives us access to a rich evidence base that we can share with senior leaders."

Internal communicators are in a privileged position. We know our audience, and what works for them. Instinct isn't enough though – it's insight which gives our leaders a sense of trust that our input is grounded in knowledge.

Having really strong performance metrics that describe what works, and just as importantly what doesn't, for the people in our organisation gives us unique access to a rich evidence base that we can share with senior leaders, and instils a sense of confidence and authority in our guidance.

In turn, that opens the door for us to work with senior leadership teams to create internal comms and engagement strategies that deliver for them, and their audience too.



**Annique
Simpson**

Internal
Communications
Manager

Close Brothers

There's at least four things I think internal communicators can do to best help senior leaders communicate and engage effectively.

First, it's critical that you spend time getting to know your leaders and watching them interact with their teams. Finding out their preferred communication style, strengths and goals will help you decide what help to offer them.

Be patient with them. We know senior leaders are one of the most time-poor organisational demographics. Couple that with the possibility that they might not see internal communication as a top priority, and you may find them lacking in the 'basic' communication skills you'd expect for someone of their seniority. Thankfully we internal communicators tend to be a flexible bunch, so we can quite easily meet senior leaders where they are – both in terms of their current communication skill level/appetite, and physically if needs be.

Don't be afraid to give feedback or challenge senior leaders. Yes, they are VIPs in the organisation, but they may not necessarily be expert communicators. But we are. So if we spot harmful or counterproductive language and/or behaviours, we should feel empowered to flag this in a constructive way and to offer suitable solutions. This is easier said than done, but important nonetheless.

I've saved the most obvious for last – make sure you know your stuff. If you want senior leaders to trust your feedback and advice, you need to show you have the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with their comms challenges. Get to know their audiences (ie. their teams) – especially their communication preferences. Keep up-to-date with theories and research in IC and related fields like HR, psychology, management studies and marketing. Developing your expertise in this way will make it more likely that senior leaders will see you as a trusted advisor, and it'll be easier for you to equip them with the right skills and knowledge to engage with their teams in a meaningful way.



It's critical that you spend time getting to know your leaders and watching them interact with their teams."

**Gabriela Torres**

Corporate
Communications
Coordinator

RMIT Europe

From my previous experience, I can highlight that leaders who have genuine interest in the well-being of their employees are the ones who are most likely to communicate and engage effectively. They embrace the tools provided by the comms team, and go the extra mile to make things happen. That being said, there are always ways to enhance leaders' communication skills:

1. The one I believe in the most is supporting them with the little details. By this I mean the automation of birthday messages, reminders of special occasions in their employees' lives, the creation of short videos for key events, and speech-polishing to make sure people's well-being is being taken into account. Human connections are what really get through and turn people into raving fans of the organisation.

2. Make tools such as workshops, surveys and team-building activities more available to leaders and managers when they need them. Not only to build career plans for their teams or to develop strategies to achieve the company's goals, but also to get to know individual employees, understand their strengths, and uncover areas of improvement to support them in.

3. Training leaders to be empathetic and set people up for greatness through how they communicate feedback is something internal communicators should always have in mind.

4. Sharing the best practices used by other successful leaders can provide evidence-backed inspiration for yours to do the same.

5. Finally, support with the building of recognition programs along with the HR department. At the end of the day, employees value a reward or a 'well-done' from their leaders more than if it comes from their colleagues.

**Helen Deverell**

Director

**Helen Deverell
Communications**

To help leaders and managers communicate effectively with employees, you first need to get to know them. Understand their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to communication, then focus on and enhance those strengths. For example, if you have an introverted CEO, asking them to host a regular webinar is unlikely to yield the best results; however, they might shine through writing a regular blog instead.

You also need to encourage leaders and managers to be themselves, to actively listen to employees and to remember to share the 'why'. So often, employees are told what's happening, but not why it's happening, so leaders have a key role to play in providing this crucial context.

**Ieva Zaumane**

Corporate
Relations
Consultant

Independent



Help them to get to know their internal stakeholders and discuss how the board's communication impacts business KPIs."

There are a few things IC professionals can do to increase senior leaders' understanding and capability to communicate and engage effectively. First, help them get to know their internal stakeholders. Second, show how they can link stakeholder issues with business targets. Third, discuss how the board's communication with employees impacts business KPIs. Fourth, create an IC and engagement strategy for senior leaders to review. And fifth, become role models for them on how to establish relationships and collaborate with employees to create trust.

IC managers have to be aware of their organization's business goals and internal context, and show this strategic big picture to senior leaders. But there are some factors which are sometimes harder to influence: for instance, internal communicators can't equip managers and senior leaders with emotional intelligence if they're lacking in that area. Equally, you can't teach them to listen if they love talking and prefer one-way communication. You can only provide valuable insights, share enlightening data, and give your best strategic advice – but the real action is up to them to take.

**Rita Zonius**

Director

The Enterprise Social
Engineer

The communications community is polarised around the leadership challenge.

On one hand, we have IC practitioners who want to make leaders happy by doing everything for them from a communications perspective.

And on the other end of the spectrum, we have IC practitioners who have recognised that we'll better prepare leaders to do their jobs in the digital age if we can coach them to shape and deliver their own engaging communications.

This means showing leaders how they can listen to what's going on around their organisation, share their thoughts in an authentic way and have conversations without the comms team having to articulate every message. Social technologies, such as Enterprise Social Networks, can play an important role in driving timely and interesting leadership communications, if we teach leaders how to use these tools confidently.

It's certainly not the path of least resistance, but it's time for the internal comms function to take a step back and encourage leaders to step up and take control. Being a leader in the digital age means truly listening to your people and engaging with them – not outsourcing that task to others.

**Shweta Midha**

Program
Communication
Manager

Bharti Foundation

Senior managers play a significant role in shaping organizational culture. Employees look to them for not only direction and purpose, but also for acknowledgement of their contributions. IC professionals bridge the gap between leaders and employees by facilitating effective, two-way communication.

Well-informed employees understand the organization's objectives, and how their own and others' roles contribute to fulfilling them.

Internal communicators create structures, narratives, feedback mechanisms and talking points to connect senior leaders with the front lines.

They rely on consistent research and evaluation as an effective measurement tool that informs the IC strategy. They get out and about with employees and are well-placed to brief senior leadership on how to connect with their teams most effectively.

Exceptional internal communication is especially crucial when teams work remotely. For example, in the Bharti Foundation, a strong bond is created between senior leaders and teachers in 254 schools (across six states in India) through regular site visits, routine memos for information and direction, motivational posters for students, and periodic newsletters featuring best practices based on both teachers' and students' achievements. This also helps to facilitate a culture of dialogue.

**Rachel Royall**

Director of
Communications &
Women's Network
Lead

NHS Digital

Communication is the sister of leadership. If leaders and managers want to achieve their potential, they need to embrace the power of effective communication to enhance organisational culture and performance.

As the lines between internal and external communication blur, IC professionals can help their leaders and managers to: recognise the value of conversation by listening to their employees and adapting how they do business; tell powerful and human stories that invoke action and keep things real; and be visible and accessible.

Communicators can do this by understanding the business and coaching leaders and managers on the tools, techniques and channels available to them. They can demonstrate case studies of where certain things have worked well, and perhaps not so well.

Internal communication is no longer the post room for the CEO; it is a powerful and strategic management function with the ability to build advocacy and drive an organisation to adapt, improve, and do great work.

**Advita Patel**

CIPR Inside Chair

**Chartered Institute
of Public Relations**

Handing over a load of criticism without a solution will not work in your favour. Have a list of recommendations ready."

First, it's important to remember that every leader will be different in their approach when it comes to communicating effectively. To understand who they are and what their comfort zone is, you need to spend some time with them. This could be through 1:1s, team meetings or work shadowing – if you can mix it up, great, as you'll see them in different environments.

These sessions will allow you to establish exactly what their strengths are and where they could improve. But a word of warning – be mindful of the relationship you have with individual leaders. If you have a strong relationship, and they see you as a trusted adviser, then you'll be pretty safe in sharing your observations as they will know you are being supportive.

However, if you're new to the organisation or haven't developed a close relationship with them, you may need to take a slightly different approach, depending on their personality.

Handing over a load of criticism without a solution will not work in your favour either, so make sure you have a list of recommendations ready. If, for example, you've witnessed people switching off in team meetings due to 'death by PowerPoint', it might be worth suggesting that the senior leader heads up a meeting without the help of a digital presentation, or with members of their team taking the lead on different sections to keep it varied. If the leader you're working with is very introverted and finds presenting difficult, it may be worth suggesting they hold smaller meetings, or facilitate more informal sessions where they might feel more comfortable.

**Amanda
Hamilton-Attwell**

Managing Director

Business DNA

Internal comms professionals should tread lightly when they want to share their knowledge and skills with senior leaders and managers. Usually, these people were effective communicators as team leaders, but when their target audiences expanded and diversified, they grew increasingly out of their depth.

Use "newness" as an entry point to provide assistance – your newness in a role, or the newness of the leader/manager.

Conduct an observational analysis when the senior leader or manager addresses a group, or facilitates a meeting. Note when the people start losing interest, and whether some people dominate the conversation while others are evidently disengaged. Then discuss your observations with the leader/manager and offer advice – and discuss the impact once implemented.

**Sia Papageorgiou**

Director, Strategic
Internal
Communication
& Digital Media

Cropley Communication

There are a number of ways internal communication professionals can help leaders and managers to become more effective communicators.

1. Give them insight: develop a strategy that defines their role in the communication process and equips them to be true communicators in a reliable and cohesive way. Make sure you include an arsenal of tools and practices for receiving, listening, communicating and responding to a message, and that the initiative is actively championed by senior management.

2. Give them tools: identify your key business priorities and prepare a toolkit (key messages, conversation starters, FAQs etc.) that leaders and managers can use to communicate relevant and meaningful information.

Keep an archive of material in one location so they can self-serve when they need to.

3. Give them training: determine their communication skills and provide training as needed. Not all leaders and managers understand or believe that on-going communication and sharing information with their staff is an essential part of their job.

4. Ensure messages are delivered and understood: always check to make sure that messages are being delivered and understood. Use research to benchmark the quality and effectiveness of communication delivered throughout your organisation, and measure improvements during and after implementation.

**Ciara O'Keefe**

VP, Product and
Customer Delivery

StaffConnect Group

IC professionals have the necessary skills and experience to train leaders in effective communication. Providing a formalized training program, ideally prior to taking on direct reports, would be an effective way to ensure that all leaders know what is required of them.

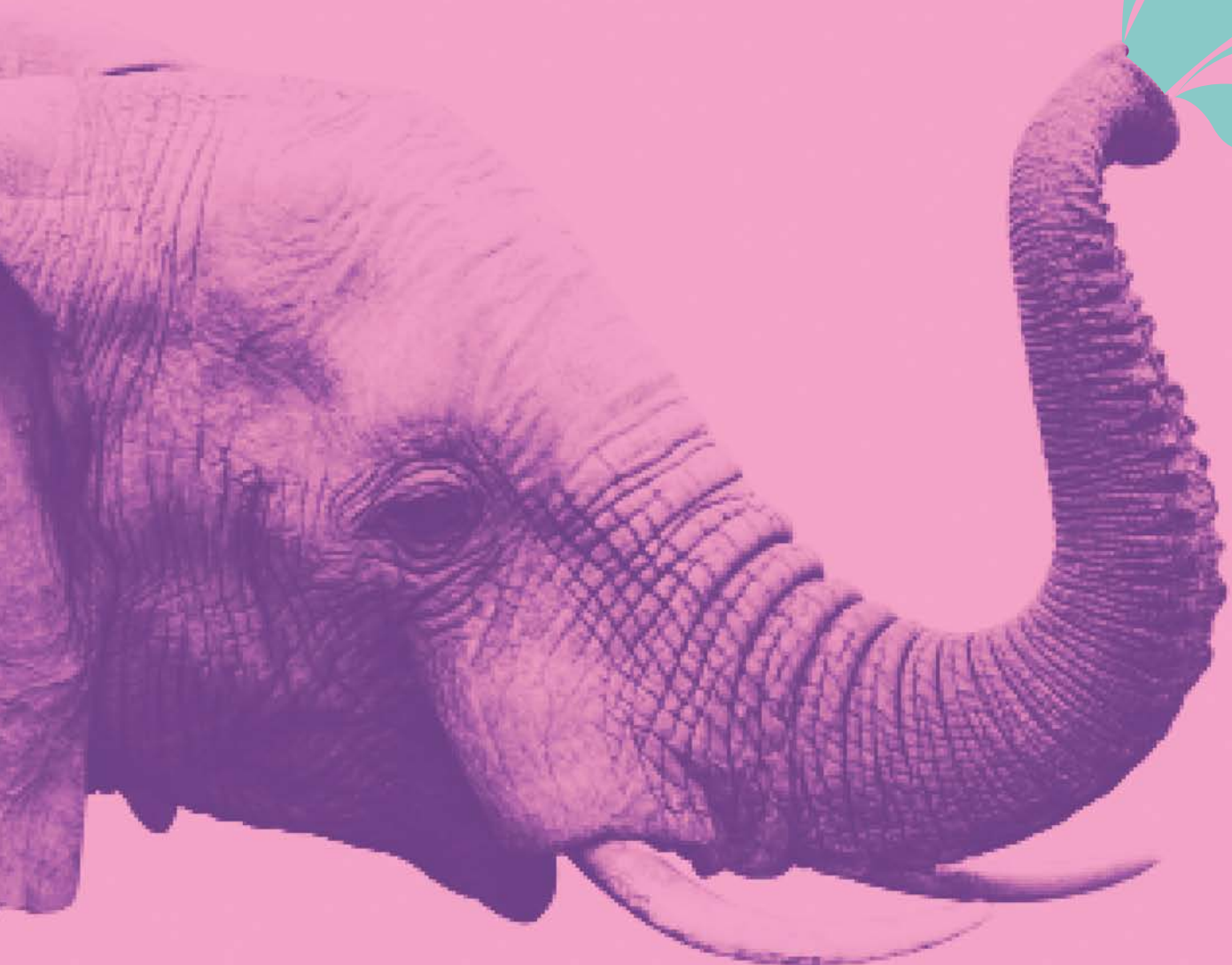
The training should include leadership communication skills and cover important aspects such as conflict resolution, empathetic listening, understanding communication styles, verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, and writing styles.



Great leaders know accountability is essential to success."

Great leaders know that accountability is essential to success. In partnership with HR, KPIs should be set based on their team's 360 feedback or the latest engagement survey. Senior leaders should also be given the opportunity to have regular check-ins to discuss how they are using and developing their new skills.

Providing support
with turning
messages into
communications
that get results



**Danae Gardner**

IC Consultant

H&H



Line managers always have two needs: they are simultaneously consumers, and conduits, of communication."

'Poor line manager communication skills' has been cited by internal communicators as the number-one barrier to IC success since as far back as 2012¹. So to me, it seems obvious that efforts should be tightly focused on supporting this very important internal audience.

The key thing to consider when planning internal communications is that line managers always have two needs: they are simultaneously consumers, and conduits, of communication. Therefore, they not only require communications that engage and inspire them, but they also need clarity around what they should do with them within their roles as people managers.

It's helpful if you address these needs in that order, and there's many ways this can be done.

One way is to consolidate manager-targeted information into regular e-newsletters that clearly outline what they should 'know, share, or do.'

For specific initiatives or programmes, tools like manager briefs, conversation guides, manager webcasts or drop-in meetings can also make a real difference, as it gives them the opportunity to share their feedback, ask questions and seek clarification.

In return, IC professionals get the chance to galvanise and inspire this crucial internal audience. They are, after all, the ones who will set the tone for the majority of your colleagues!

So, take the time to carefully craft these targeted communications for line managers, and watch them become your biggest comms champions. Front-footing your efforts will mean you reap the benefits of saved time, and a bigger impact down the track.

¹ Gatehouse, *State of the Sector*

**Amit Joshi**Communication
Consultant

Yorkshire Housing

**IC professionals should not agree to communicating something without understanding the why."**

It starts with senior leaders. They have to be transparent with their internal communications managers about what they want, why they want it, and the relevance of the message. IC professionals should not agree to communicating something without understanding the why – push back until you have everything you need, and help them understand the risks and rewards.

Armed with an understanding of the task, IC managers should evaluate which platform would be best to use. Is it email, vlogs, town-hall meetings, micro team meetings or a broadcast message on the company intranet? Having identified the right platform, they can begin crafting the message or campaign.

However, make sure to work with the senior leader on this, as you don't want it to come across as something that the comms department have drafted and sent out by themselves. Employees will see through this, and you'll achieve zero engagement.

Internal communicators should act – in the words of The Godfather – as a 'Consigliere' (adviser). Understand the situation, and assess the most appropriate platforms to communicate the message. It's also important to gauge employee reaction by analysing impact.

However, none of this is possible without the transparency of senior leaders. They need to position their communications managers within their circle of trust in order to achieve engaging internal comms.

**Alejandra Pinedo**Internal
Communications
Analyst

Bank of Mexico

It is important to guide the communication of senior leaders towards the actions they expect from their employees – to reformulate the message from the perspective of the employee in order to be more efficient, and generate empathy.

**Reformulate the message from the perspective of employees."**



Paul Cawley

Communications
& Engagement
Officer

Balfour Beatty CLG

Help leaders to simplify their messages. Ask what outcome they want and shape internal comms accordingly. And advise management on the correct medium(s) once clear on the audience and desired outcome.



Ask what outcome leaders want and shape internal comms accordingly."



Sean Williams

Vice President,
Education
& Internal
Communication
Practices

**True Digital
Communications**



Use visual language and metaphors, outline how you'll realize the purpose, and give people a part to play."

In many organizations, the issue for leaders and managers is lack of process for communication, especially in more technical industries like technology, manufacturing, medicine and finance. So giving your leadership team a process to follow can be very helpful.

At True Digital Communications, we teach the Face2Face Communication model. The 4Ps – **Purpose, Picture, Plan** and **Part** – give the structural outline, the *"how to communicate"*. **CORE – Changes, Objectives, Reasons** and **Effects** – are the *"what to communicate"*. And **HEAR – Honor, Echo, Ask, Respond** – guides people on how to be good listeners.

The 4Ps work well for meetings, conference calls, and emails – you clearly state the purpose of the communication, use visual language and metaphors, outline how you'll realize the purpose, and give people a part to play. The CORE is what people want/need to know. The HEAR helps to demonstrate you're listening.

This process helps to demystify communication – and leaders and managers really appreciate it!



Terry Hart

Business Advisor

**Designing Successful
Change**

I think it's as much a leader's responsibility to develop their communication skills as it is for IC professionals to advise and guide them. They need to focus their thinking, and be clear about the points they want to make.

They then need to have the trust in their internal comms team to best position their messages, and select the appropriate channels for them.



Alison Sharpe

IC Consultant

Independent

Be succinct. Nail down the 3-5 key points that you want to share, and stop there!"

Firstly, help managers to believe in the importance of the communication, so that they take ownership and want to do it. Ask them: what would happen if you didn't communicate this particular message? How would your team feel if they heard the news from someone other than you? How do your team feel when you take the time to communicate with them directly? Sometimes the fallout of not communicating (clearing up the effects of gossip, etc.), can be more time-consuming than taking the time to plan and deliver the comms themselves.

Now that you have their attention, give them some key tips like these on designing internal communications:

- 1. Start at the end:** ask yourself: what action do I want as a result of this communication? Is everything else in place to enable that action to occur successfully?
- 2. Find the hook:** what matters to the individuals in your team? How will this particular communication affect them?

Connect your message to something current in your team's day-to-day working lives.

3. Be succinct: nail down the 3-5 key points that you want to share, and stop there!

Finally, help them explore ways to share the communications. Face-to-face is ideal, but not always possible. What is crucial is that all team members receive the same message at the same time, or as close to the same time as possible. For example, if you deliver your message face-to-face at a meeting or employee conference, be ready to follow up with an email, phone call or video call to everyone who wasn't there to ensure they feel included and don't miss out on important information.

And for managers who don't feel confident delivering comms in-person, provide training sessions to help them out, with a focus on face-to-face presentation skills.

So, what can internal communication professionals take from these wonderful pearls of wisdom from the IC community?

For starters, it's clear that there's plenty we can be doing as an industry to help our senior leaders and managers be the best they can be.

But before we can make a stab at getting results, we have to turn them on to the benefits that good internal communication can bring. Emphasising what's in it for them – the higher levels of engagement, the reduced turnover, and the increased motivation and productivity to name just a few. Inspire them with facts and data and tap into their imagination with stories of success. Ask them what they want to get out of internal communication, and share how you can help them achieve their goals. And always underline the WHY – to unlock the emotional desire to engage.

Once they're on board, we need to demonstrate the power and importance of building an inclusive culture. Inspire them to listen to employees, and act on feedback. Share your own front-line insights to get them in the loop. And encourage them to visit the places where their people burn the candle, so they can build connections with the bottom line.

Help them be authentic too by ensuring they walk the talk, and live out their words every day. Teach them to build rapport by sharing their own insights or concerns with employees. Encourage them to speak in their own voice and act as 'one of the people'. And remind them to show they care by recognising employees for their hard efforts, or remembering the little details by sharing small gifts or even just kind, personal words.

But just as marketing officers would struggle without access to a PC, or pilots would fail if they didn't know how to land a plane correctly, leaders and managers may find it difficult to grasp these key lessons if we don't provide them with the support and tools they need to succeed at communicating. That means giving them the resources, equipment, and awareness to develop their skills without us having to keep hold of the reins – while at the same time putting our own knowledge to good use by sharing it with those who need it.

And lastly – we need to apply our keen expertise to turn the messages leaders and managers want to deliver into communications that drive positive behaviour change. Selecting the appropriate channels, and employing them wisely. Teaching them the art of storytelling to engage people's hearts and minds. And tapping into our own strategic creativity to build communications that truly inspire, delight and astound.

We won't pretend all this is an easy feat. Because it's not. But by applying the right approaches, and continually working with senior leaders and managers to gradually build on their capabilities, we'll make huge strides towards eradicating the challenges of leadership communication that currently obstruct our path to success.

Now, it's over to you!

Thanks to all the contributors who've made this report a goldmine of IC inspiration. We're sure you'll find all these pearls of wisdom invaluable when it comes to supporting your senior leaders and managers in becoming outstanding communicators.

At H&H we love exploring the different views, opinions and insights that are bristling throughout the industry, and it's been great to be able to contribute the ideas contained within these pages to furthering knowledge and understanding within the IC community.

Nothing excites us more than improving the way people communicate, interact and connect in workplaces around the world. And every day, we throw our collective energy, knowledge and creativity into making it a reality.

Whether it's a big transformational change, connecting people with the direction of the business, guiding leaders and managers or influencing behaviours – we use a resourceful mix of common sense and strategic insight with a large dollop of creativity to achieve truly outstanding outcomes.

So if you're looking for an IC helping hand and we sound like your perfect match – we'd love to hear from you.

Talk to us today!

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