

Communication Strategy and Plan

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Change Management
A Highlands Group White Paper Series



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American Futurist Marilyn Ferguson said, “It’s not so much that we’re afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it’s that place in between that we fear. It’s like being between trapezes—there’s nothing to hold on to.” Early in the process of implementing change, it is important for change leaders to craft a communication strategy and plan to keep employees and other stakeholders informed of and energized about the change work. Employees want to know why they should change (business case), what the end result looks like (future vision), and how the change will affect their roles and responsibilities. They not only want to receive information, but they want to engage in dialogue with leadership. They want a forum for two-way communication. And like all stakeholders, they want something to “hold on to” during change.

Research shows that a robust, well-implemented communication strategy is one of the key levers for breaking down resistance to change and engaging stakeholders during “that place in between” as the organization moves toward the future. The communication strategy and plan is based on the following 10 leadership communication principles:

- **Principle 1: *You cannot “not” communicate.*** Every action sends messages to the organization and its people.
- **Principle 2: *Employees are overloaded with information.*** Unless the message is focused, concise, consistent, and answers their questions, it will get lost in the “pile.”
- **Principle 3: *Attempting to reduce uncertainty by withholding information is futile.*** People will fill an information vacuum with their own content, and it will usually be worse than reality.
- **Principle 4: *You must customize the message to the audience.*** Employees and other stakeholders want to know: “What is happening? Why is it happening? How will I be impacted? What do you want me to do about this? Are we making progress?”
- **Principle 5: *You do not have the luxury of deciding whether or not to communicate about sensitive topics.*** Your only choice is whether you’re going to proactively participate in the communication.
- **Principle 6: *Communication is not just about sending information.*** Information simply informs. Communication influences thoughts, feelings, and actions. Real communication is a two-way process of sharing and listening.
- **Principle 7: *The message sent is rarely the message received.*** The context drives how people interpret messages. To reduce distortion and increase understanding, people must hear the same message 10 to 20 times.
- **Principle 8: *Senior executives are the least-trusted source of communication.*** Employees trust their direct manager the most.



- **Principle 9: *Employees don't receive primary information through communication events and products.*** They receive information by asking questions of their direct manager and through informal communication channels.
- **Principle 10: *Communication credibility is a function of leadership credibility (competence and character).*** How you act and what you do communicates more clearly than the words you speak. Leaders must be visible.

During a change effort, a large portion of leadership's time and attention should be spent on "sense-making." It is important to help employees understand themselves and their situation; to create a line-of-sight between the project goals and vision and what people need to know, feel, and do; and to increase acceptance, motivation, and engagement.

Creating a communication strategy and plan includes five steps:

1. Analyze the audience.
2. Identify the communication messages.
3. Create the communication strategy.
4. Create the communication plan.
5. Ensure implementation and accountability.

1. Analyze the Audience

In this step, identify the target audience for the communication and determine each group's unique needs.

Target Audience	Communication Needs (What we want the target audience to know, feel, and do.)
	Know: Feel: Do:



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Tasks

Complete the following tasks to analyze the audience:

1. List the target stakeholder groups who need to be fully committed to the change (e.g., sponsors, leadership, employees, suppliers, etc.).
2. Identify the communication needs of each target audience group.
 - What does this target audience group need to *know* to become fully committed?
 - How does this target audience group need to *feel* to become fully committed?
 - What does this target audience group need to *do* to become fully committed?

The know-feel-do approach is a powerful way to ensure that communication meets the exact needs of the listener and engages the head (know), heart (feel), and hands (do) of the audience.



2. Identify the Communication Messages

In this step, create a series of communication messages that meet the needs of the target audience that can be delivered in different forums over time.

The Message Hierarchy Model below depicts the five core messages to send to employees. When employees are experiencing large-scale change, they generally want to know the following:

- **Vision:** The ultimate vision and benefit of the change initiative
- **Case for change:** The reason why we are changing
- **Change description:** An overview of the change and how is it different from the current situation
- **Implementation approach:** How the change will be rolled out
- **Impact on organization and people:** How the change will impact individuals and the organization



Message Hierarchy Model

Address all five message layers in each communication, ensuring that you discuss the foundational layer, *impact on organization and people*, as openly as possible. The foundational layer contains the information employees want and need the most, but it is also the information most rarely given during organizational change.



3. Create the Communication Strategy

In this step, identify the communication strategies you will use to reach the targeted audiences with the appropriate communication messages. It is also important to identify the different types of media to use.

Below are 10 leadership communication strategies that we have found helpful for communicating to a corporation or an individual site or division. Use these as a foundation for creating an outstanding communication strategy.

1. **Establish consistent messaging (3-30-3-30):** Leaders have many opportunities to communicate, from formal presentations to quick conversations in the hall and elevator. Therefore, it's critical to establish messages that are focused, concise, and easy to use. The 3-30-3-30 communication method helps you quickly capture the essence of the message in four different time frames.
 - **3-second message:** Create a 3-second message by sifting through the business case for change data and selecting the three to five words that best summarize the message.
 - **30-second message:** Create a 30-second message by writing a one-sentence description for each of the three to five most important words to summarize the business case for change.
 - **3-minute message:** Create a 3-minute message by writing a one-paragraph description for each of the three to five most important words to summarize the business case for change.
 - **30-minute message:** Create a 30-minute presentation that captures all the data, rationale, and charts of the business case for change.

Distribute the 3-30-3-30 messages to leaders and change agents to use in their communication.

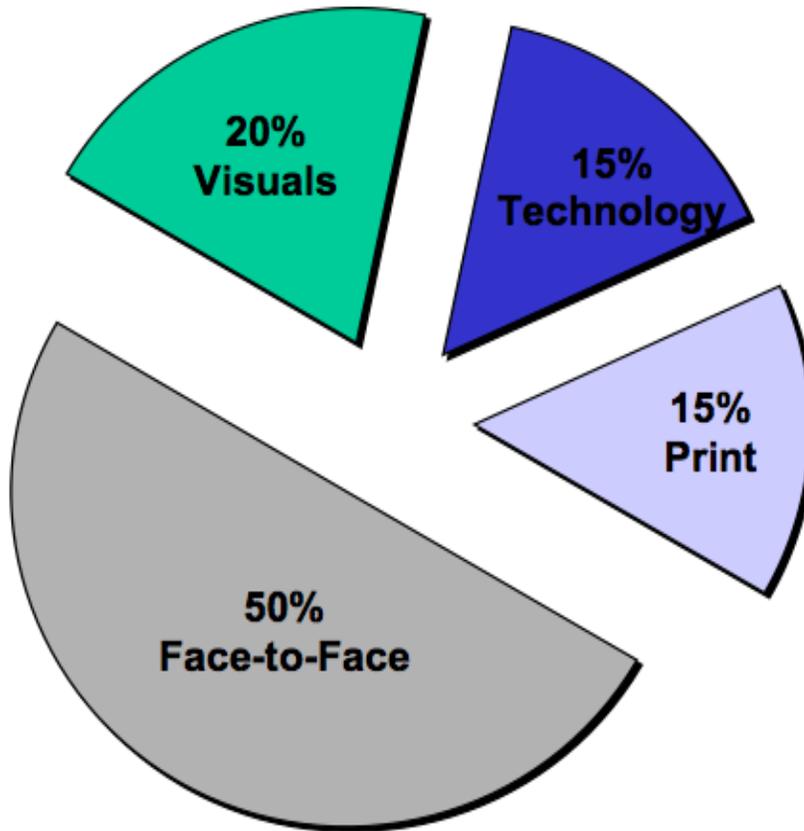
2. **Create a 12-month schedule:** Plan regular communication activities in advance.
3. **Use leaders to deliver the message:** Have leaders share with and listen to employees by providing them with tools, information (e.g., vision, case for change, 3-30-3-30 messages), plans, schedules, and frequently asked questions. Use managers to communicate with front-line employees. "Reaching and Changing Front-Line Employees," by TJ Larkin and Sandar Larkin (*Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 1996), is an excellent article that reveals some important facts about communication, as summarized below:
 - Employees don't trust messages from senior executives because they don't know them. They trust their front-line supervisor or manager the most.
 - Most of the time, front-line supervisors hear about change at the same time as employees do, so they can't answer key questions such as, "When will this occur? How will this affect me? Will my role change? Will I have a job?"



- Leaders don't typically engage supervisors early enough in the change process to hear their concerns, ideas, and issues. Leaders need to answer the above questions for managers and supervisors first, and then they in turn will be able to convey the message to employees.
 - Leaders need to describe the supervisor's role and desired behaviors in the change process.
 - Leaders need to give supervisors speaking notes or scripts that answer key questions and outline what they can and should say.
4. **Create forums for two-way communication:** Create forums where dialogue and engagement occur.
 5. **Use multiple media:** Communicate using various methods and media suited for different audiences and different learning and listening preferences. (See the section below about strategic media mix.)
 6. **Piggyback on existing communication vehicles:** Use existing communication vehicles as much as possible.
 7. **Ensure both proactive and reactive communication:** Anticipate and plan for communication needs, then manage potential crises by responding in an effective and timely manner.
 8. **Over-communicate:** The "Rule of 10" says that before people fully understand a message they need to hear it multiple times in multiple mediums from multiple sources.
 9. **Create messages using the know-feel-do approach:** Every communication should convey what employees need to *know* (e.g., information, data, schedule); what leadership wants them to *feel* (e.g., hope, vision, confidence); and what they should *do* (e.g., action items, behaviors).
 10. **Measure and collect feedback:** Ensure communication effectiveness through simple feedback mechanisms.

Strategic Media Mix

Research shows that when you "vary the medium you reduce the tedium." It is important to communicate in various mediums because different individuals have different learning preferences. Use the Strategic Media Mix chart to identify the different mediums that can be used in your communication strategy.



Strategic Media Mix Example

Answer the following four key questions to determine strategic media mix:

1. What types of visuals should be used in the communication? What percentage of our communication should be visual?
2. What types of technology are available? What percentage of our communication should be technological?
3. What types of print should be used in the communication? What percentage of our communication should be in print?
4. What types of face-to-face meetings should be employed? What percentage of our communication should be face-to-face meetings?

The above chart gives an example of the mix of communication mediums in a communication plan.





4. Create the Communication Plan

This step helps you establish a 12-month, actionable communication plan. This plan is also known as the communication implementation plan and outlines the detailed tactics. You can use it to monitor monthly status and progress. The template below is an intuitive, easy way to create a communication plan. It helps you pull together data from the previous three steps.

Target Audience	Key Messages	Media	Time Frame	Point Person and Communicator
	Know: Feel: Do:			
	Know: Feel: Do:			
	Know: Feel: Do:			

Tasks

Complete the following tasks to fill out the communication implementation plan template:

- List all of the key stakeholders (target audience) who need to buy in to the change.
- Use the know-feel-do approach to identify the unique needs of (at a high level) and key messages for each target audience.
- Identify the appropriate media for each message.
- Identify the expected time frame for each communication.



- Identify the point person (the person writing the message) for each communication and the communicator (the presenter of the message).
- Share this plan with your target audience and ask for their feedback.



5. Ensure Implementation and Accountability

After you create the communication plan, be very clear about who has responsibility for implementing the plan. Use the template below to assign communication responsibility.

Communication Activity	Responsibility	Date

Complete the following tasks to fill out the template:

1. Identify the communication activities that are part of your plan.
2. List those groups or individuals who are responsible for each communication activity.
3. Determine the dates each communication will occur.

Conclusion

Alfred North Whitehead said, “We think in generalities, but we live in detail.” Too often, leaders hear that they need to communicate more; employees complain that they don’t know what’s going on; and stakeholders hear about changes second-hand. A well-developed communication plan helps leaders and change agents avoid these problems by providing regular communication to stakeholders and giving them something “to hold on to” during change.

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