

Inside many organizations, the communication function is poised and ready to take on more a strategic role. But first a crucial shift needs to happen in how the function is perceived by the rest of the organization – senior leadership in particular. Here, Chris Gay shares six essential steps to shifting communication from tactical support discipline to strategic business driver, and how to challenge perceptions along the way.

From tactical to strategic: developing an action plan

Redefining the role of communication and winning support from leadership

By Chris Gay

In most organizations, gone are the days when communication professionals do little more than create materials intended to make things sound good – no matter how bad they really are. Yet there are still too few organizations where communicators are considered strategic partners with a critical role in resolving business issues.

To continue this move toward being a business partner, we need to question how we work, from the way we set objectives, organize our work and measure our effectiveness, to the skills we possess and discussions in which we participate.

Some refer to this process as managing the *governance* of the communication function. To do this effectively, we must first view ourselves and the work we do differently, and then educate leaders on how we can add greater value by changing the governance within which we operate.

Focusing on the right objectives

This process starts with setting objectives to ensure that the communication function

contributes as much as possible to business success. This means looking at the business objectives and understanding how communication currently contributes to each one.

If it's difficult to create a list of contributions for each business objective, this means there's probably a need to focus more on strategic, proactive communication. As a team, brainstorm ways your department can add value to each business objective. At this point, don't think about obstacles and restrictions, be they financial, logistical or political. Avoid excuses like "we don't have time," "they won't let us," or "we've never done that before." Have a free-form discussion and really push your team to see just what the ideal situation could look like.

You don't need to look far for inspiration. Communicators around the world are challenging their leadership teams to look at them differently. Here are some examples from client organizations we've worked with:

- In a financial services organization, a communication executive stood in front of her organization's operating committee and asked them directly if they would rather have her team editing their memos or creating media

strategies that would have an impact on corporate reputation and the bottom line. Put that way, the executives obviously didn't opt for the editing.

- A consumer products organization hired a VP of internal communication, making sure that the CEO was a critical part of the selection process. This helped ensure that the CEO would be receptive to coaching and insight from the new VP.
- At a manufacturing organization, the communication staff conducted an exercise in which they listed all the tasks they performed, assessed which ones added the most value to the organization, identified what was missing from the list, and then recontracted with their clients to perform the work that adds the greatest value.
- An insurance company instituted a goal for all its leaders to improve their teams' engagement scores as part of their annual bonus. Communicators collaborated with leaders to develop and execute the strategy to accomplish the increased scores.

These examples show how communication functions are looking for ways to measure their work and prove its value, but that can only be done if the work they are doing is truly valuable.

Ensuring business value in your work

It's important to take a look at the work being done and ensure that it's the "right" work. For example, communicators are often trained on the importance of making sure that every word and comma is exactly right. Often we write and rewrite paragraphs until they are near perfect. But just how much does all this drafting, editing and proofreading contribute to the bottom line?

This isn't to say that the words aren't important – they certainly are. When used with skill and care, they help us ensure that information is presented in a clear and compelling way. But laboring over words on a page represents only a small part of the strategic communicator's role.

When deciding how best to spend one's time, there is a prime question that communicators should consider: If you break your salary into an hourly rate and log the "cost" of the tasks you perform, would the CEO feel that the invoice he or she receives is good value for the business?

Clarifying the role of communication

The diagram in Figure One (right) can help a communication function look at where it is

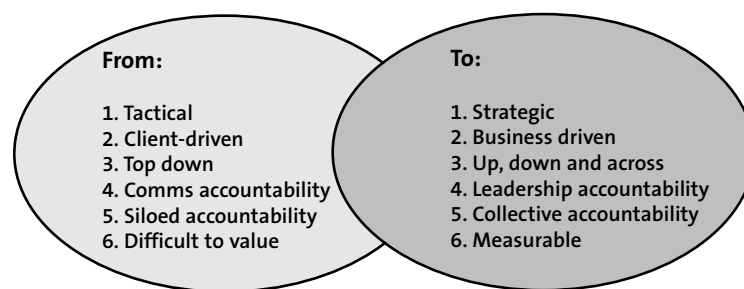
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currently on the continuum from tactical to strategic, and consider where it should be. Most organizations choose not to be on either extreme of these ranges, but the important thing is to be very deliberate about the *ideal* position for your organization, and put a plan in place to ensure you get there if you aren't there now.

Let's take a look at each of these elements in more detail.

Figure One: The tactical vs. strategic continuum



1) Tactical to strategic

How much time should communicators spend on tactical work, such as creating documents, and how much time should they spend meeting with managers and executives to consult, coach and create communication strategies? With regard to the tactical work, communicators often say, "If we don't do it, who will?"

The right solution depends on each organization's resources and needs. Perhaps it's possible to provide training and tools for managers so they can do more of this work themselves. Or maybe you can stop producing a particular newsletter that doesn't get high readership. Even a small shift in the way you

↓ KEY POINTS:

- The governance of the communication function has an impact on the work it does and how it is perceived within the organization.
- To continue the move toward business partner, communicators need to question every facet of their operation and educate leadership on how communication can add greater value.
- An important element of becoming a strategic function is the ability to focus on goals that matter to the business and demonstrate value.
- Functions that feel they have more strategic value to offer should work out where they sit on the tactical vs. strategic continuum, and develop an action plan to move to their ideal position.

- ◀ allocate time – when deliberate and well-planned – can make a big difference in the capacity to be more strategic.

In one manufacturing organization, for example, communicators were asked to track their time to determine how they were spending it. Bar graphs were used to depict how much time was spent on administrative and tactical tasks, and how little time was spent on strategy. This system helped communicators determine the ideal balance for their organization, set targets for themselves, and monitor their progress.

2) Client-driven to business-driven

It's important to be client-focused, but what does this quality look like in practice? In other words, are communicators truly serving their internal clients if they're not adequately addressing the broader needs of the business? Is the communicator's role simply to fulfill client requests, or is it to provide counsel and work in collaboration with clients to assess business needs and set priorities around what, how and when information should be communicated?

The move to a business-driven approach can take place on many fronts. In one technology organization, for example, the communication team was the primary distributor of companywide e-mails. Whenever an internal client requested an all-employee e-mail, this group sent it. After dutifully fulfilling these requests for a time, the group decided to become more proactive. It set up a "dummy" e-mail account and tracked what people received in their inboxes for eight weeks.

The results were a cause for concern. Messages were uncoordinated and at times inconsistent or redundant. The vast majority of them were about technical outages, administrative issues and recent job promotions. Most importantly, the inbox exercise revealed that employees were receiving very little strategic information that addressed the business strategy or promoted the organization as a great place to work.

Armed with a clear picture of the current state, the organization's communicators took a more proactive approach to companywide e-mail, exercising greater control over what was sent out, when and to whom. In the end, they made a conscious move toward using companywide e-mail for more business-driven purposes.

Make no mistake: moving to the right side on this "from/to" continuum does require some push-back and persuasion. Which is why, to be successful, communicators need to develop strong influencing and negotiating skills, and be

knowledgeable about best practices so they can back up their recommendations. The more examples and data you have to prove your case, the easier it is to make the sale.

3) Top-down to up, down and across

When organizations look at employee survey results, they frequently see dissatisfaction with upward communication. In fact, in one consumer products organization, leaders' willingness to listen was so poor that over 60 percent of employees said they wouldn't bother telling anyone if they had a good idea about how to improve the company's products or processes. Imagine all the lost opportunities to improve productivity and efficiency?

So, who owns upward communication? Is it the communicator's role to make sure that employees are listened to, or is it merely to ensure that they hear the messages that leadership wants them to hear? The issue with upward communication is that in many organizations, no one truly owns it. Often it's recognized as a key component to effective leadership and management, but many organizations don't hold leaders accountable for communication.

Communicators can contribute to two-way communication in a number of ways. They can put in place formal systems as a core part of communication strategies, such as an "Ask a Question" on the intranet, town-hall meetings and brown bag lunches. They can also educate leaders and managers on the importance of two-way communication, preferably using data from the organization, and provide them with the tools and skills they need to be effective.

The critical questions for communication functions to address are: How much ownership do we take for upward communication? How actively will we address it? And will we focus on formal systems or will we also collaborate with leaders and managers to provide them with the necessary tools and skills?

4) Communication accountability to leadership accountability

How often when something goes wrong is it blamed on poor communication? But who owns that "failed" communication? For communication in an organization to be truly effective, leaders must have a sense of ownership and participate in the process.

A technology organization gained this commitment from leaders by creating a leadership communication philosophy that was approved and then enforced by the executive

team. The philosophy was brought to life for the executives by creating scenarios that helped them determine, for example, just how seriously they would commit to open and honest communication with employees given a variety of different business situations.

This is a critical conversation for leaders to have to determine what's right for their organization and then "own" that philosophy. The communication function should push to have this kind of discussion with the executive team and establish clarity on leaders' communication role and philosophy.

5) Siloed accountability to collective accountability

This issue is primarily present in organizations with highly decentralized communicators reporting to individual businesses, or in those with an account executive model where communicators are assigned to particular businesses. In these situations, the challenge is centered on where a communicator's loyalty and accountability reside. Is it with the individual business, the central communication function or a balance of the two?

It seems the obvious answer here would be a balance of the two, but that's not always easy to accomplish. When communicators are "in residence" with one particular business, it often takes a proactive, purposeful plan to ensure that they remain connected to a central group of communicators and some core communication philosophies and messages that remain common to the overall employee experience.

For example, a manufacturing organization with a highly decentralized communication function, created a communication council to which all of the company's communicators belonged. The council offered a number of membership benefits, such as workshops for skills development and sharing of best practices and ideas. In return, council members committed to communicating organizational strategies and messages in addition to their local business strategies.

Effective communication councils function much like a handshake – they signify an agreement to fulfill an obligation and receive something of value in return.

6) Difficult to value to measurable

An organization must proactively design communication strategies that will have a business impact, in order to be able to measure a business impact. In some organizations, metrics are critical to proving the value of

communication and justifying funding for new projects. In other organizations, leaders don't expect communicators to prove the impact of their work. The question becomes, even if leaders don't set this expectation, do communicators want to proactively establish it themselves?

The key to measuring effectiveness connects back to where we began this article: setting the objectives first. What is it that the communication function is geared to achieve? Is it focused on increasing employee engagement scores, improving the communication skills and effectiveness of leaders and managers, ensuring that communication is flowing up, down and across the organization effectively, or helping employees truly understand the business and the contribution they can make?

Certainly the objectives may address these issues or others, but to prove the value of communication, you must ensure that you set a measurement for each and every objective that you establish. Measurements can include things like specific questions on an employee survey about leaders or upward communication, overall engagement scores, or pulse surveys. They may also take the form of operational measures, such as the number of open enrollment forms completed correctly due to effective communication, or a reduction in the number of accidents following a safety campaign.

Many organizations need not look beyond their own walls for valuable measurement ideas and methods. Just talk to someone in marketing. By and large, marketing functions do a great job of measuring the results of their work, and with a little tailoring, many of their approaches can often be applied to internal communication.

Shaping perceptions

Governance – defining the work, who does it and how it gets done – impacts how a communication function is perceived within an organization. The key is to proactively shape that perception and not let it happen by default.

By boldly defining the breadth and value of communication, you can elevate its role from one of tactical support discipline to strategic business driver. scm

Further reading: "Selling the communication function at DTCC," *SCM* October/November 2004 (Volume 8, Issue 6)

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