



COMMUNICATING STRATEGY: Getting your message across

Quick Points: An overview in 60 seconds

In this executive briefing I will provide key pointers or tips for communicating a new strategic direction in your organisation. We tend to spend so much time researching, analysing and thinking during the strategy making process that we give too little attention to arguably the most important task, which is communicating the need for a new strategy and the change it will involve. Here are 11 key pointers:

POINTER #1: Use multiple communication routes.

POINTER #2: Communicate personally.

POINTER #3: Keep it simple. Communicate graphically.

POINTER #4: Think about FAQs.

POINTER #5: Create urgency.

POINTER #6: Allow involvement.

POINTER #7: Demonstrate total commitment.

POINTER #8: Avoid leakage.

POINTER #9: Keep communicating.

POINTER #10: Be honest.

POINTER #11: Communication isn't just downwards.

Communicating Strategy

Too little attention is usually given to effective communication in organisations. The next time that you meet friends from another organisation, out in the bar after work or at a dinner party, ask them about the effectiveness of communication in their firms. Chances are that the most frequent response is *"I don't know what's going on outside my team"*.

But communication is a vital, if frequently overlooked, part of the strategy process. A new strategy, if it really is a new strategy, will involve change and the investment of effort. So communication is especially important, as it must drive:

- § Commitment
- § Ownership and
- § A sense of urgency.

Here are 11 key pointers to consider when communicating a change of strategic direction in your organisation.

Pointer 1: Communication Routes

Use multiple communication routes.

People rarely hear the message that you want to communicate to them. Your audience will interpret your message in different ways especially when the news focuses on major change that could affect jobs, livelihoods and positions within the organisation. Most will only remember snippets. Use multiple routes and communication channels to unambiguously reinforce your message.

Pointer 2: Personal Communication

Personal communication is best when initiating the change process and the first message must be given by the manager or leader responsible for the business unit where the change will take place. To both ensure that the message is interpreted correctly and to demonstrate widespread commitment to the need for change, follow up the leader's communication *promptly* with face-to-face communication to individual teams with the message this time being delivered by team managers. This provides a good opportunity to answer detailed questions and to tackle ambiguity.

After the personal messages have been delivered at business unit and team levels, the following channels can be used to follow up:

- § Newsletters
- § Information leaflets describing the new strategy and goals
- § E-mail messaging
- § Team briefing

and of course communication by walking around.

Pointer 3: Simplicity

The message must be understood by staff at all levels and in all parts of the business unit.

Avoid technical "jargon" or esoteric management terms such as "ROI", "B2B" or "EPS".

Try to communicate pictorially or graphically rather than using numbers and financial illustrations. For explaining how your strategy works and the actions that will make it happen the *Strategy Map* is a good tool. It uses the same approach as the balanced scorecard and looks at four dimensions or perspectives – (a) People and Learning; (b) Business Processes; (c) Customers and finally (d) Financial results. A visual map, using these dimensions, can help to show how actions fit together to produce the desired financial results.

Pointer 4: FAQs.

People will, naturally, have a lot of questions.

Spend time with your management team working through what the frequently asked questions might be. Again, this helps for a clear organisation-wide message to be delivered.

Remember, if questions can't be answered, there isn't a problem with taking them back to the management group for consideration. This avoids giving ambiguous or inconsistent messages across the organisation or business area.

FAQs will probably centre around:

- § "Do I still have a job?"
- § "Will my job change?"
- § "What will happen to my people?"
- § "Why do we have to change – can't we carry on doing the same thing?"
- § "How will this affect other departments?"
- § "Why can't you tell me more?"

Pointer 5: Staying still is not an option

One of the major objectives of your first communication initiative must be to create the need and motivation to change.

You must be able to clearly and simply explain why change is necessary and why standing still, doing nothing, is not an option. Describing how the outside marketplace will change is an effective lever. Try to explain how all stakeholders – including staff - will benefit. Include clear goals for the new strategy.

Pointer 6: Involvement

Tell staff how they will be involved in the change process and how they can have their say.

This might be through local workshops or project activity. You need to define these involvement mechanisms *before* you start communicating.

Pointer 7: Demonstrate total commitment and alignment

The management team must demonstrate *total* commitment and alignment behind the new direction.

Behaviours *must* be seen to change immediately to support the new strategy. Team managers encouraging discussion on how their teams can make a contribution to the new strategy is an example.

Pointer 8: Avoid leakage – be first in

Don't let the change process get off on the wrong foot by being second in with the message.

The worst thing that can happen is for news of the change to leak in from another department or business area. Communication *to* neighbouring business areas that aren't directly affected must take place *after* the message has been delivered to your business area.

Pointer 9: Encourage regular communication and stick to commitments

Do communicate progress regularly and do stick to promised future updates.

In particular, use communication channels to celebrate “wins” and recognise staff that have made the wins possible.

Pointer 10: Be Honest

Only communicate what you are sure about. Less can be better than more. In the long-term honesty will be respected.

Pointer 11: Upwards and Downwards

Communication is upwards as well as downwards.

Tools like team briefing and opinion surveys can help you judge how your messages are being received and interpreted.

Finally

I hope that you have enjoyed this briefing.

You can find more on the website or e-mail me using the link below. I enjoy personally helping businesses - some of the work I undertake includes:

- § Forward looking business scenarios – what are your future challenges?
- § Facilitating board level strategic reviews, with a particular emphasis upon the definition of tomorrow's competitive environment
- § Design and implementation of Balanced Scorecard performance measurement systems
- § Research to help identify what potential capital providers will look for in your business plan
- § Training: Strategic Thinking, Scenario Planning, Performance Measurement and Strategic Change Workshops.
- § Product portfolio assessment. Helping the business to define the optimal product portfolio – balancing future competitive conditions with the probability of achieving future planned performance
- § Communication programmes
- § Organisational audits – assessing the innovative capability of your organisation

Best regards,

Robert Davies