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BEST PRACTICES, CASE STUDIES AND STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATORS

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# Functional fortitude: do you have it?

Working in harmony with other departments to strengthen the organization

BY LIZ GUTHRIDGE

Despite working toward the same overall goals, there's often friction and discord between the internal communication department and other functions. Here, Liz Guthridge explains why it's vital to collaborate for the wellbeing of not only the internal communication team but also the organization as a whole.

Human resources (HR) specialists and information technology (IT) experts often seem clueless about what communication professionals do for a living. The irony is that as communication professionals we should be able to explain what we do, how we add value and why we should work together in a clear, credible and compelling way.

Yet, reality generally differs from theory. My colleagues and I are constantly commiserating how hard it is for us to play well with staff functions, especially HR and IT.

You've heard the refrain... "They just don't get it...All they want is our help making their stuff 'pretty'...They keep asking for campaigns with tactics."

## The importance of working with other functions

But collaborating with fellow functions is crucial. Our agendas keep converging and they'll continue to overlap. For example, consider communication

and HR. We're often jointly responsible for employee engagement, the employee experience, branding, leadership communications, change management, culture and crisis planning and preparedness (see Figure One on page 26). As for IT, we need to work more closely together on all things digital – including social media, video streaming, wikis, blogs, intranets and the latest tools available to us.

Face the facts. We can't avoid working with HR and IT. Plus, we need to acknowledge the following five facts about our organizational life:

1. **We're outnumbered.** HR and IT departments have much larger staffs than we do.
2. **We're under-financed.** HR and IT have bigger budgets than we do.
3. **The law is on HR's side.**
4. **HR and IT don't report to us.** However, the communication team may report to HR.
5. **Our audiences are key.** Of most importance, our workforce – from executives to frontline employees – care about having simple, valuable HR services and technology with clear communication, not being participants in our turf wars.

## Keeping up with HR and IT as roles evolve

It's also important to note that the top HR and IT roles in progressive organizations are quickly evolving into broader positions, becoming business strategists first and functional experts second. And we're trailing them. For example, the 2007 Arthur W. Page Society' white paper, *The Authentic Enterprise* examines how chief

communication officers need to adapt so they can better respond to the drivers of change for 21st century business. The report also outlines *the dramatic changes other corporate staff professions have made already, including HR and IT.* (The italics here are my addition.)

Reading *The Authentic Enterprise* jolted me out of my daily complacency, which happens to be one of the society's goals. (The Arthur W. Page Society is a professional association for senior public relations and corporate communications executives. With this report and other actions, the society is working to strengthen the policy-making role of the chief PR officer and the chief communications officer.)

### Improving cross-functional relations

Healthy tension between us, HR and IT is normal, but the animosity that often exists is destructive to our working relationships and to the outcomes we want for our organizations.

As communication professionals, we have to put our differences aside and make truce with our fellow functions. We need to develop "functional fortitude" – similar to intestinal fortitude or plain "guts." If we don't declare truce, the consequences are too extreme. We will fail our customers – frontline employees to executives.

### What does a truce look like?

There are three steps to consider when attempting to achieve a truce. First, stop the constant complaining and start taking the high ground. Second, act like strategic business partners, not order takers or smug know-it-alls. Third, make an effort to build bridges.

To build bridges, consider taking the following actions:

- **Recognize we're in the people profession.** Don't be like one of my former clients who insisted on specializing in employee communication but refused to have anything to do with HR or HR-related topics. Leaders at all levels deal with people issues, which are part of HR's responsibilities. So if you're helping leaders communicate, you're in the people business.
- **Act as advisors, counselors and educators to HR and IT – even if they don't ask.** Yet don't feel as if you've got to convert everyone. Instead, focus on those who are most sympathetic to our cause and who are influential with their peers.
- **Think big and act bigger.** In other words, "ladder up", which is a useful expression I learned from one of my HR clients. When you ladder up, you keep climbing to higher rungs of a symbolic ladder until you find

common ground, such as your shared mission to add value to your customers – namely employees at all levels.

- **Set boundaries.** (See Figure Three, on page 27.)
- **Learn enough of the subject matter to be proficient.** Just as communication professionals need to know and speak the language of business to be credible, it's helpful to understand what our functional friends are working on. You don't need to be an expert, but you do need a base level of knowledge.
- **Build relationships and network with HR and IT people inside and out.** Ideally, you want to be able to talk candidly with individuals you don't regularly work with to get insights. You also may want sympathetic communication professionals to serve as a sounding board.
- **Be lean.** In other words, follow lean principles and practices that can benefit the communication teams, HR and IT simultaneously. In addition to adding value to your customers, these principles include leveraging resources, finding and eliminating waste and striving for continuous improvements.

As you're building bridges, also remember you need to use them regularly. ▶



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**“WE HAVE TO PUT OUR DIFFERENCES ASIDE AND MAKE TRUCE WITH OUR FELLOW FUNCTIONS.”**

### KEY POINTS

- **Building a healthy relationship with other functions is vital to the success of any company. Attempting to work as an isolated unit is virtually impossible, especially in today's technological climate.**
- **There are action points that communicators can follow to improve cross-function relationships. These include building up a working knowledge of other functions' activities.**
- **It's impossible to give a definitive answer to the question of where internal communication should sit within a company. It's dependent on many considerations including employee demographics and HR needs.**

Figure One: Where communication and HR intersect



Figure Two: What can happen if employee communication reports into HR

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Advancement of initiatives/issues that HR and employee communication share, such as employee engagement, employee branding employee experience, branding, leadership communication, change management, culture, and disaster planning and preparedness.	Tendency for messages to be HR-centric rather than business centric.
Match of “say” and “do” messages.	Also tendency for messages to be less timely and less audience-centric because HR and lawyers insist on extensive reviews and approvals.
Greater coordination and collaboration among HR and employee communication staff members.	Inclination for communication staff to focus disproportionately on HR issues, not company-wide organizational concerns.
Opportunities to maximize money spent because budget isn’t divided among two departments.	Possible trend for communication staff to serve as PR function for HR both internally and externally.
Ability to synchronize calendars and scheduling that can simplify employees’ lives.	Limit on professional development and career advancement opportunities, especially if employees want to explore external communication.
	HR communications could lag in adopting new tools, techniques, and technology either because HR leadership doesn’t understand their value or prefers spending budget on HR matters.

**Should internal communication sit within HR?**

Those of us comfortable building bridges may not necessarily be at ease with another foundational issue: whether communications and HR should share a home. And the question is always, “should the communication function be housed in HR?”. It’s not vice versa, because of HR’s size and influence in organizations (see Figure Two, below left).

Another question is if the communication team is going to report into HR, should this be all of corporate communication, employee communication, or HR communication? The answer is: it depends.

Each organization is different in terms of its industry, customer demands, competitive situation, employee demographics, business maturity, HR needs, communication needs, leadership capability and capacity, and so on.

Determining the best place for communication requires more than a toss of a coin. It’s an involved process, best led by experts in organization design.

However, based on my experiences with organization design, organizations, communication staff and HR over the years, I’ve developed the following points of view:

- A stand-alone corporate communication department with a strong chief communication officer reporting into the CEO or COO is best for the most effective and efficient communication.
- Second best, if that option isn’t feasible, is to house the corporate communication function in either strategic planning or HR.
- Unless there are special circumstances, corporate communication should be one group. If employee communication, executive communication and HR communication are sliced off and placed in other departments, the disadvantages can start to outweigh the advantages. To keep quality – and peace among staff members – everyone will need to be extremely diligent about monitoring, managing, and leading the specialized communication functions (see Figure Two, left).

So wherever we report, let’s build bridges. And please, no jumping or pushing others off. It’s one for all and all for one. **scm**

For more information on Melcrum’s upcoming report *How to develop effective internal communication partnerships*, visit the reports section of [www.melcrum.com](http://www.melcrum.com)

1. <http://www.awpagesociety.com>

## THE BACK STORY

Two years ago the topic of communication and HR working better together became personal, not just professional.

In January 2006, one of my clients and I finished co-authoring a book on the human side of disaster planning and response. We had two goals for the book. First, we wanted to fill a void in disaster planning and response that neglected employees. Second, we wanted to encourage HR and communication teams to collaborate and lead more on this issue, which they could then use as a springboard for other organizational issues. Based on our personal experiences and the aftermath of 9/11, we knew employees were often left out of disaster planning. And even companies' responses post-disaster weren't entirely employee friendly.

We began our book project in early 2002 and put it on hold a year or so later when our publisher got cold feet with the subject matter. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 showed that we were onto something, and we scored a book contract with a different publisher.

I had met my co-author, Kathy McKee, in the early 1990s when she was the Senior Vice President of HR for Standard Chartered Bank and I was a principal with Towers Perrin, the HR consulting firm.

When our book, *Leading People Through Disasters: An Action Guide for Preparing for and Dealing with the Human Side of Crises* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006) was released, we hit the book tour.

My biggest surprise was the other speakers and topics at the HR conferences many of whom were lawyers! And their take on the communication-related topics was what you'd expect from the legal profession – mitigating risks of lawsuits.

Based on that experience, I started to reach out more to HR professionals to educate them about employee communication and the special role we play. I've joined SHRM as well as NCHRA (Northern California HR Association, one of SHRM's largest chapters). When the NCHRA board members asked me last year to run for a three-year board seat, I agreed.

For every baby step I take to sensitize the board about employee communications, I then stub my toe. For instance, NCHRA's annual conference this fall is featuring a session called, "Communications – more than an employee perk." (Since when has communication been a perk, because we do it every day at work?) So I will continue toiling...

Figure Three: Stories about setting, and keeping, boundaries with HR and IT

THE SITUATION	WHAT THE COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL DID
The new director of employee communication wanted to carry out an audit to assess the effectiveness of the communication channels she had inherited at her new organization. Her boss, the VP of HR, said no because an employee survey would be too disruptive.	Georgia, the employee communication director, did focus groups instead. Although the qualitative information wouldn't be as useful as quantitative data, some data was better than nothing. Plus, being new, she was able to use the visits to the company sites to meet not only employees, but also site leaders and others. Her new boss was fine with the focus groups.
The three top HR leaders scheduled a meeting with the employee communication manager to talk with him about a great new project they wanted to start – a companywide campaign to tell employees how wonderful HR is.	Don, the employee communication manager, suggested that HR hire an outside communication firm to work with HR on this project, using HR's budget, not the employee communication budget. He said he and his staff were already overcommitted on HR projects and ongoing communication. Plus, his staff members were experts in HR communication, not marketing HR to others. With this recommendation, which the HR leaders accepted, he was able to get outside help. The campaign died quietly before it started.
The employee communication staff was incredibly lean – just the director and one part-time employee. The new VP of HR suggested that the director find a couple of interns in the local college's marketing communication program who would work for free.	Caroline, the employee communication director, ignored her new boss's suggestion. Caroline didn't want to exploit workers. And if she set up an intern program with school credit in return for work, she'd be spending too much of her valuable time teaching and training without enough commensurate benefits. Caroline started job hunting in earnest and soon left for another director-level job.
One of the IT directors provided the director of employee communication with a 36-page report explaining a new tool for the company's call center employees and tech support workers to use. The IT director wanted the communication team to send the report to all affected employees via email. To read and comprehend it, you'd benefit from a PhD in engineering.	Ben, the employee communication director, contacted the training department to check on training's plans for rolling out this new tool. He worked with them to develop a coordinated strategy for call center employees and tech support workers. As for the 36-page report, Ben summarized the contents into three paragraphs that became part of training.
The HR subject matter experts (primarily benefits, compensation, and learning and development) were working in silos as they developed new programs. They all had separate project plans, including timelines for rolling out their new initiatives.	Katie, the new HR communication director, first met separately with each subject matter expert to discern exactly what each individual was doing. She then worked with them separately and collectively to develop a coordinated calendar for introducing new programs.

### CONTACT DETAILS

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