

## 10 Traps to Avoid If the Top Employee Communication Role Is Vacant

What happens when no one is accountable for employee communication? The reasons can be varied: The organization may not believe it's large or mature enough to support the role. Or, leaders don't want a formal employee communication function. Or, the leaders plan to fill the top vacancy but are taking time to meet many internal and external candidates.

On the upside, the organization saves money on payroll. There's also potential savings on other employee communication expenses. Another plus is that without a dedicated leader more people inside and outside the communication function share the responsibility for communication.

On the downside, the organization can fall into several traps, highlighted here. My clients and I have either experienced or observed all of these problems. When we didn't identify them quickly or manage them well, the problems grew, often costing much more than the annual salary of a top-notch communication professional.

If you've got interim or shared responsibility for employee communication, try to avoid these traps. (Even organizations with large employee communication staffs can fall into these traps.)

- 1. Reacting, not planning.** Staff members find themselves primarily responding to requests from executives and others. As a result, staff members don't have time to plan or set priorities, much less thoroughly prepare talking points for managers, create Q&As, and develop message maps. By operating defensively rather than offensively, they don't consider how to add more value to their customers. Nor are they thinking about improvements.
- 2. Following leaders, not guiding them.** The executives may not receive regular coaching on employee communication issues if there's no senior employee communication professional accountable to the organization and to executives. Also, no one may be nudging the leaders to get out and about to avoid isolation and get firsthand knowledge from employees. Or, no one may be tracking emerging issues or hot spots that could adversely affect leaders' credibility and employee productivity. To remedy this in one organization, the HR leader and I, as an outside consultant, teamed to advise the site's top executive.
- 3. Gurgling or gushing unfiltered information, not processing it for consumption.** Without one individual or a department controlling (or at least watching over) the flow of the spigot, employees may either be deluged with information or in a drought. For instance, one company's corporate communication department recently discovered that nine different departments (including itself) were sending nine separate internal electronic newsletters to all employees on an uncoordinated schedule. Yet, like the ancient mariner who found water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink, these many newsletters didn't quench the key need: "What's going on that affects me and my job?"

As I probed, I learned that no one who was sending out information was putting it through a filter that answered these questions: Is the information relevant to employees? Is there context? A link to the vision and strategy? Does it clarify the situation? If there's action involved or requested, is it clear what individuals are supposed to do?

- 4. Tolerating inconsistencies, not guarding against them.** Without a filter to review the communication or to provide guidelines, there's a bigger risk that messages aren't

consistent. They may even be contradictory. It may not be easily apparent what's the most accurate and up-to-date message, especially if employees don't have a "go to" person or department to ask for clarification. Confusion may reign externally too, if the internal messages don't match with the external communication, including advertising, marketing and press releases. Who and what do employees trust?

5. **Broadcasting messages, not targeting them to niches.** Sending the same messages to everyone may be a fast and transparent way to work, but it's not always effective. Don't overlook niche audiences who will benefit from targeted messages, especially if a major change is underway, such as an acquisition, sale or a complex employee benefit change. This is precisely the time for more targeted communication.
6. **Talking in monologues, not dialogues.** Stories are an effective way for leaders and others to make their points, as research and experience show. But who wants to hear monologues all the time? People want a break, especially if they sense they're hearing only one side of the story. Any one who gets information outside of company channels knows there are multiple sides with many nuances. And many people these days are interested in adding their own two cents (or more) to the story and having a real conversation. But it's easier to "tell and sell" rather than "ask and engage" during a resource shortage. As a result, people don't have an easy way to share their insights and opinions.
7. **Pinging key audiences, not engaging with them.** There's a tendency to cut back on regular check-ins with key audiences, advisory board sessions, or other face-to-face meetings when there's a vacancy in the top employee communication job. It's not just a time crunch, but the skill set and comfort level of junior staff members. They are more prone to writing in their cubes (including sending e-mail messages) than socializing change with individuals across functions. As a result, no one may sense when a change effort is halting or has run into another problem.
8. **Going with gut feelings, not hard metrics.** When individuals are hustling to respond to requests, it's easy to act without thinking about the importance of metrics. Yet good data can help with benchmarking the current state, contributing to an effective plan, and showing a return on investment. Also data helps with defining success and determining whether you're on the right course. Gut feelings can't replace good metrics, especially if there's a shortage of experienced guts.
9. **Being wasteful, not resourceful.** Without anyone at the helm of the employee communication function, it's easier for communication projects to start, stall and restart, which wastes resources. Also, if a number of individuals are creating and distributing information independently, they're duplicating efforts, which is a waste. Then they inundate employees with information, much of it probably useless to them. Employees lose precious time culling through it, which adds to the waste.
10. **Discouraging junior staff, not encouraging them.** If the junior communication staff members believe they are toiling without much supervision, mentoring or professional development, they'll lose motivation. Or, if they can't tell how their work is part of a larger plan or strategy, they'll be dissuaded. Their productivity and morale can drop. They may even decide to leave for a more supportive environment, which also is wasteful to the organization and hinders the employee communication work even more. To protect against this for one client, I worked side-by-side with junior staff members to provide on-the-job training as well as heavy-lifting project help.

You can avoid or recover from most of these traps without major damage—assuming you recognize what's happening. What you do and how you do it needs to be situation specific. Contact me, Liz Guthridge of Connect, to discuss your circumstances.