connect consultinggroup

Change in leadership

When a new leader comes on board, either through a promotion or as an external hire, consider taking advantage of the following opportunities to work with the individual to:

1. **Find his or her voice in how he or she will present himself or herself, and the business.** By their very nature, leaders are action-oriented rather than contemplative. Yet, when a leader takes on a new role, it's an excellent time to pause and reflect both on ***what*** actions to take and ***how*** he or she wants to act and be perceived. Communication professionals can help the new leader fine tune his or her communication style, both for information sharing and listening.
2. **Develop the key themes for the first 100 days as well as the first year in office.** In this age of information overload, great communicators distill their messages to a maximum of three to five themes that are closely linked to their business goals and their change agenda. This way they are able to reiterate and reinforce messages that will resonate with individuals. Communication professionals can help with developing the themes and honing the messages to ensure they are consistent, memorable, inspiring and energizing.
3. **Identify critical stakeholders and how to engage them on an ongoing basis.** Leaders serve a multitude of stakeholders, and the squeakiest stakeholders aren't necessarily the ones that need the grease to move the leader's agenda forward. Communication professionals can play an active role in identifying the most critical stakeholders and the most effective ways to engage them. It's also crucial to determine the most appropriate communication channels to use and to maintain the momentum you establish. All too often the communication starts and stops as the leaders get involved in other matters or lose interest.
4. **Define his or her communication strengths and weaknesses and decide how to play to the strengths and bolster the weaknesses.** No leader is equally skillful at all of their job requirements. But leaders have team members and staff who can fill in the gaps and supplement the weaknesses. From a communication standpoint, it's important to identify the leader's strengths and weaknesses early on so you can play to the strengths and backfill the weaknesses.
5. **Determine your role as a communication professional, including the value you add, and start to build trust.** At the start of your working relationship, it's important to spend time deciding how you and the new leader will work together and what role you will play. Where can you add the most value? For instance, are you a coach? Cheerleader? Ghostwriter? Facilitator? Eyes and ears? Conscience? Agenda setter? Dot connector? Combination of some or all? Other? Knowing what's expected of you sets the stage for your ability to deliver, build a relationship and establish trust.

Mergers & acquisitions

Effective communication is a critical component of successful mergers and acquisitions. It can't guarantee success, but its absence can contribute to failure. Ten tips for more effective communication are:

1. **Feed people's huge hunger for information and need for direction.** If people get little to no information, the organization can risk a loss of productivity and loss of business. Employees don't have the information they need to do their jobs, especially in client or customer-facing roles. The confusion that results causes the organization to be sluggish to respond to customers and opportunities. Also, some employees will attempt to fill the black hole of information themselves with rumors and speculation that distract others and themselves from doing their regular work.
2. **Listen; don't just tell your story.** Two-way communication is especially important at times like this, especially when leaders are expecting employees to focus on their regular work while prepare for the unexpected. Being able to ask questions helps individuals confirm what's happening around them, and determine how to best respond. Also, by listening, leaders quickly learn what employees' hot buttons are, and what obstacles may exist.
3. **Make sure leaders are visible internally, their actions and words match, and they commit to communicating regularly.** Individuals are very tolerant of hearing "I don't know" answers to their questions as long as their leaders are out front and explaining the process they are following to make decisions and get answers. In fact, information can be "content lite" on the ins and outs of the combination issues for awhile, as long as the leaders are visible and explain the process the organization is following. The leaders do need to provide updates on a regular basis to reinforce that the deal is still happening.
4. **Identify, target and regularly re-evaluate all of your stakeholders to ensure you are meeting their needs.** For example, avoid Hewlett-Packard's situation with family members protesting the HP-Compaq merger two months after it was announced, which escalated into a full-blown proxy fight and court case lasting more than six months.
5. **Coordinate internal and external communication, especially for consistent messages, timing and speed.** If you're telling Wall Street that you expect to achieve synergies soon after the deal closes, don't start reassuring employees (many of whom are stockholders) that "this is a merger of equals" and "we don't anticipate any reductions in force in the near future" as many companies have done. Instead, tell one consistent story externally and internally in a timely fashion. Inconsistent communication undermines employee confidence and trust.
6. **Explain the process and timing for each stage: due diligence, approvals, closing and integration.** Employees generally expect the process to go quickly. Unless they have been through an acquisition or merger before—which is becoming more and more common—they don't realize all the steps and approvals that must take place. Also, boil the legalistic language down to the common denominator so that all the non-lawyers will know what's going on.

7. **Establish communication roles and responsibilities between the companies involved in the merger or acquisition.** As soon as logistically and legally feasible, it's important that the companies establish a mutually supportive approach and process for communicating, especially if they have different cultures and styles for communicating with employees. By coordinating approaches, internal and external audiences of both organizations will receive consistent messages on a timely basis, which will avoid a number of problems. Also, this will begin to lay a communication foundation once the two organizations become one.

8. **Acknowledge and address employees' feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.** You can't reduce or eliminate the stress people are experiencing, but you can acknowledge that it is normal to feel anxious and uncertain during an acquisition or merger. Also, you can encourage employees to consider what they can and cannot control, and focus on what they can control and do about it. By acknowledging the emotional side of mergers and acquisitions and not just the facts in your communication gives people permission to start to let go of the old and concentrate on the new.

9. **Always remember that informal communication influences people more than formal communication.** Organizations in which leaders and managers hold town hall meetings, meet in small groups, hold casual gatherings, get together over breakfasts and lunches and encourage other face-to-face interactions report greater successes in their integration than organizations that use more traditional media. The formal tactics, such as e-mails, newsletters, intranets and manuals, are important but more as a way to supplement the human element of the combination.

10. **Maintain momentum and commitment to "business as usual" activities and continue to communicate them.** At times of uncertainty, employees want to grab onto events and activities that have a sense of normalcy about them, especially related to pay and benefits. Also, if you're telling employees to keep focused on their regular work yet you're not providing them with information they've come to expect, you'll be quickly cited for sending mixed messages.

Telling it straight, no chaser

Tell it to us straight, employees keep saying. After two years of scandals with no end in sight, employees are more cynical than ever. They're also working at breakneck speeds, so they're even more impatient about stopping to pay attention to what may be less than truthful information. Meanwhile, the corporate communication professionals who want to consider themselves anything but spin doctors, continue to be challenged to do more with less. How do you serve all masters well? Here are five questions to ask yourself to make sure that less is really more, and it's also transparent, untarnished and trustworthy to employees.

1. **What's the whole story?** Issues these days are incredibly complex, complicated and often controversial. Acknowledge that rather than trying to so simplify the issues that you dumb them down. Concerned employees are going to ferret out the facts. In telling the story, be sure to include the context and rationale, especially for company decisions. And recognize that there are multiple sides to the story, which will be evident to those who get news and information outside of company channels. By telling the whole story in a straightforward manner in plain language, you can't be accused of spinning.
2. **How would the story read on the front-page of the Wall Street Journal?** Ask your leadership team that question too, if anyone prefers to say "no comment." Today that phrase is about as quaint as "yes, sir" and "no ma'am" and will get you the same reaction—no respect. So it's critical that you decide what you need to say and how you want to say it— either before you're ever asked or immediately when queried. Then make sure everyone who's going to be telling the company story hears it early on, and is able to practice telling it in their own words.
3. **Who's got credibility on this issue?** Don't trot out the usual spokespeople just because they're trained to talk—especially if they have little to no credibility on the issue or with the employee group. For example, don't be the communication professional who triggered her company to spend millions of extra dollars when she invited the wrong doctor to speak at an important event. Before the doctor started speaking on the dangers of asbestos exposure to a group of people who had just experienced airborne asbestos, he said he had to divulge that he was a doctor of waste management, rather than a medical doctor as we were led to believe. Immediately after the good doctor was booed off the stage, the communication professional's boss deviated from the company script. To his credit, he recognized that he had to repair relations with the audience, and he reassured us that the company would spend whatever was needed to help us recover.
4. **What's the most effective way to get the word out?** Just because e-mail is fast and consistent, don't make it the default communication method. Think through which communication channels are best suited for the type of message you're sending. Also consider the audiences' preferences. To do this well, you need to understand your audience, including their tolerance for jargon, the tone and style they like, the communication vehicles that work for them, and the timing they expect.

5. **Do we build, buy or borrow resources?** Ask yourself that question each time you need to get the word out, and especially when you are looking for feedback. Depending on your timing, the sensitivity of the issue and other factors, you may have a number of viable options to do the job. For instance, you may be able to borrow subject matter experts from other departments to help craft messages—at least the basics. You probably can find outside experts who can provide you just the amount of capability you need. You also might be able to take advantage of some of the free or very inexpensive web-based survey tools. Use your creativity! Based on the approach you take, you also may win kudos from your audience for using resources efficiently and economically.

5 actions that improve linkages between the board and senior leaders

For years, well-meaning advisors have told nonprofit leaders and boards that they need to act more business-like. The counsel frequently includes "develop an edge, harden the heart and sharpen the thinking" so success will follow. Nonprofits have sucked up the advice, applying it where appropriate.

Yet, nonprofit leaders generally have not turned the tables to share some of their special success stories with for-profit leaders. Many nonprofit boards practice principles, generally around inclusion, that could benefit their brethren in the for-profit sector – especially in this age of shareholder and employee activism after all the corporate scandals.

1. **Advocate a passionate commitment to mission and strategy.** When new board members join**,** make sure they participate in a comprehensive orientation program, especially one that introduces them to the heart and soul of the company. Encourage all board members to keep learning as much as they can about the company's promise to customers, shareholders and employees. Also, board members should meet as many influential people and informal leaders, such as a founding father, a lead engineer or scientist, the top sales person, key customers and so on. This level of interaction and knowledge will solidify their association with the organization, which will help them be better ambassadors.

2. **Have board members act as ambassadors.** Invite board members to represent the organization in a variety of settings with different stakeholder groups, including employees, shareholders, community leaders, customers, investors, and government relations. The board members will get more access to a greater variety of people, which is helpful to both the board members and the organization. Typically, the board members get information through the CEO and his or her direct reports. By removing the constant filtering that tends to exist, the board members can improve transparency and increase involvement of important stakeholders, including shareholders. Plus the board can be better in its checks and balance role. And from the stakeholders' perspective, they get to meet more faces within the organization (hopefully friendly).

3. **Adopt an open door policy for meetings.** Include senior leaders at board meetings, even if it's only for selected sections and a chair at the back of the room. This participation can be a win/win for both board members and senior leaders. Board members are able to make better decisions because they have direct contact with a range of individuals who know the organization very well and represent different points of view. The board also gets to know senior staff members better, which helps the board with its succession planning duties. From the senior leaders' perspective, the exchange of information with the board helps them with their day-to-day duties. They are privy to what the board has debated and decided, which provides them with a compelling context for performing their jobs and motivating their staff members.

4. **Publish agendas and minutes.** Inform senior leaders of the board's agendas in advance and release the minutes of what the board decided after the meetings. These are powerful tools to involve more people in the strategic business of the organization. Besides providing useful information to senior staff, the sharing sends a strong message that the board's work is transparent.

5. **Encourage frequent changing of the guard.** To avoid complacency, burnout, and potential conflicts of interest, nonprofit boards often institute term limits for board members. That's a fact of life to accept, not something to work around. As a result, in these situations, board members and senior staff members recognize that the working dynamics will always be changing. If other organizations were to prepare or even encourage this type of change rather discount it, they would be much better equipped to embrace the inevitability of change.

Communicating with labor

Communicating with labor either on an ongoing basis or surrounding labor negotiations and a potential strike requires special agility. Besides following the spirit and letter of the law, it's important to adhere to these seven lessons:

1. **Respect the high stakes.** Recognize that the stakes can be high for everyone—the company, union leaders, union members, other employees, customers, shareholders, and others. For example, the company may face difficulties in meeting customer demand and expectations, additional expenses, a drop in stock price, and other problems. Union leaders may be facing re-election challenges, especially if the membership believes they make a misstep. Employees may be concerned about the potential loss of jobs. All may be worried about loss of face and a tarnished reputation. The role of the communication professional to acknowledge these potential minefields in shaping and delivering messages.

2. **Collaborate.** As much as possible, build a broad work team that includes representatives from HR, legal, finance, media relations, employee communications, industrial relations, vendors, compensation and benefits experts, executives, supervisors and union leaders. Work to find common ground, agreement on key messages, and consistent action and talk.

3. **Plan and act at the same time.** Acknowledge that time may not be on your side, and you will need to take action before you finish planning. But still take time to plan, such as making sure you understand the situation, goals and objectives; you set measures for success; you identify the key stakeholders and the credible spokespeople; you figure out the critical timing; you test and refine messages; and you adjust on the fly.

4. **Use plain language.** Forget about business-speak and talk as real people do. For example:

"Yes" Words	"No" Words
People	Human capital
You	Employees
Check	Distribution
Service that counts under the pension plan	Credited service

5. **Explain, not defend.** Step back and provide context. You want to set the scene to help everyone understand the problem, respect each other and reach conclusions together. Besides sharing rationale, you also want to be as open as possible and take symbolic actions. The symbolic actions appeal to the heart as well as the head, and show your commitment to the issue.

6. **Reach out.** Go beyond your key stakeholders to other important audiences who have influence. These audiences can include family members, customers, the community, the national union, and others. If you don't tell your story, others will make it up for you.

7. **Treat technology as friend and foe.** Appreciate that technology can both hurt and help your cause while communicating. For instance:

Friend	Foe
Speed	Limited access
Ease to send a large number of messages	No human touch and tendency for messages to be one-way
Consistency	Mangled messages
Personalized information	Cyberventing inside and outside the organization