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STARTING OVER: HOW TO REMAKE YOUR DEPARTMENT

PART 2 OF 3

In part two of their series on how to recreate a communications operation, the authors tell how they “sold” the new departmental structure to staff, management and others in the organization—and how they went about implementing it while simultaneously keeping internal communication functioning.

In the last issue of *The Journal*, we explained how the internal communications department at Pacific Gas and Electric Company recognized the need to transform itself to a centralized function through a methodical process called The Roadmap to Increased Effectiveness.

Our transformation occurred at an opportune time. Just after we announced our change, PG&E executives told us they were undertaking an unparalleled company-wide business and culture transformation. This transformation, which will take several years to complete, is designed to position the company to

once again lead the utility industry.

This new business model required those of us in internal communications to simultaneously address concerns caused by the change, keep the department going and search for an external business partner to provide ongoing support.

Step 1: Deal with change

At the same time we developed our new business model, we had to plan how to deal with our day-to-day employee communication work and manage the transition. So as Virginia and her manager met with senior executives to get final

approvals on the new business model, Liz prepared both a transition communication plan and a change plan.

According to plan, Virginia announced the new business model and the related changes in a specific sequence. First, to company executives at their regular staff meeting, then to communications staff at their staff meeting, and finally at individual meetings with each internal communications staff member (first with the representatives whose jobs were being eliminated, then with the remaining staff members). Finally, she met with all communications staff at their regular staff meeting.

Later that day, she held a group meeting to answer more questions and get everyone on board. Liz followed up several days later with a “work-out session.” Our goal was to involve staff members in shaping the department’s future and get them energized about it. We also wanted to encourage them to raise any issues or concerns.

Two tasks we undertook early on served as a strong foundation for the department. First, we created the department “elevator speech” on our new direction so we would all be on the same page as we talked with others. (See Figure 1.)

We also addressed executives’ needs and concerns. Although all the executives said they supported the change, we recognized that some might miss the old ways of working, especially those who had lost the daily services of their representative. We developed a master “marketing plan” with specific action points for each to address individual executive needs and concerns. Virginia and the staff then met one-on-one with each executive and continued to meet with them as needed to help them

through the transition to our new operating model.

Step 2: Keep the department going in the right direction

So our key programs were under way, and we had to start forming

the new department. For example, we held strategy meetings with all department members to review our plans and refine our focus, conducted one-on-ones with individual staff members to discuss their new roles and responsibilities and we developed new department ground rules. (See Figure 2.) These rules of the >

FIGURE 1

ELEVATOR SPEECH: INTERNAL’S/EXTERNAL’S NEW DIRECTION

Floor 1: The time was right to put in place major structural changes to the way we deliver communications.

Floor 2: Research we’ve conducted inside and outside the company showed the need for stronger, consistent communications around critical, company-wide issues, as opposed to a silo-based approach.

Floor 3: Layered on top of that, we took a 20 percent budget cut, requiring that we take action this year. As a result, the client representative and positions in our department that supported the silos were eliminated.

Floor 4: As the company’s overall direction changes, it’s critical we align our department to better support that effort. We’re focusing our limited resources where they can have the most impact.

Top floor: *(If asked)* We’re bringing in an outside communications agency to provide flexible and scalable resources to help meet the company’s needs.

FIGURE 2

RULES OF THE ROAD

- 1 Add value.** Support and contribute to our communications plan. Before undertaking any action, ask yourself what value it adds to our communications plan, mission and PG&E’s goals. If you have any doubts or questions, seek input.
- 2 Take accountability.** Be responsible for following through on your commitments, and doing them in a quality manner and on time.
- 3 Be a team player.** Share information and ideas, ask for input, provide feedback and help the team meet its objectives. Use and support department standards.
- 4 Work efficiently.** Use shared file drives. Use standard templates. Follow department guidelines and practices. Make suggestions to improve processes.
- 5 Drive for results.** Develop measurable goals and corresponding metrics for your projects to gauge success.

road were the department's initial step toward core competencies that we would refine and introduce later in the year. With PG&E undertaking its own transformation and needing internal communications to be a full business partner, we had wanted to be able to perform at a high level. All these steps, especially the rules of the road, reinforced the fundamentals we needed to make this happen.

We also created a new format for department staff meetings that reinforced these rules and encouraged greater participation, especially around sharing ideas.

Step 3: External business partners give ongoing support

Within a week of our announced changes, we launched a search for an outside communication firm. As explained in the first article, we had decided to supplement our smaller staff with an external agency. This way, internal communications would pay only for the outside expertise it needed at the time, rather than having a large staff of generalists. Thereby, the department could provide more cost-effective, flexible services and deploy them more quickly.

Prior to the launch, we had identified seven consulting and PR firms that would meet our criteria, including experienced staff who could work on site at PG&E.

We met with all of them together to save time, giving them detailed background information, sharing our expectations and asking them to answer our specific questions and respond with a proposal two weeks later.

Once we met with the firms, it took about five weeks to review their proposals, select and interview

finalists, check references, meet with the selected organization—ROI Communications, Inc.—and finalize the contract.

Throughout the proposal process, ROI staff demonstrated they understood the issues we faced and had experienced representatives at all levels who could start work immediately. They also were willing to supplement PG&E's research with their own—a critical point because some employees and executives were weary of surveys and wanted to see action.

Lessons relearned along the way

During the transition phase, we relearned these three lessons:

- 1 Change is personal. All executives were in favor of our change in principle, but in practice it became another matter. Several of those who were experiencing a personal loss of their assigned representative needed individual attention and some hand holding and extra support. Our marketing plan was critical to our success.
- 2 Change can be slow to get legs, especially when it means adopting new work habits. Internal communications staff members supported the concept of adopting common work processes, templates and procedures and sharing files and directories on the department LAN. But because everyone was so used to working independently, it took a while for team members to experience the benefits of doing things for the good of the group and the company, and to remember to use the common tools.

3 Involvement takes a lot of time yet is critical to owning the change. Past performance does not always predict potential. Four of the seven firms we interviewed had worked for PG&E before. Yet their proposals and actions didn't demonstrate a deep understanding of the company or our situation. Of the three finalists, two were new to us and we selected one of them. The internal communications staff members worked triply hard last summer—doing their new jobs, filling in where needed during the transition and getting involved in reshaping their department. While some questioned whether they had time for all this extra-curricular work, which included reading proposals, interviewing finalists, reviewing templates and adjusting marketing plans, they soon felt the advantages, especially when they realized they were taking control of their future. And when they recognized all we had accomplished together in just a few weeks, they had pride in being owners of an up-and-coming new department. ■

Editor's note: The last article in this series (to appear in the November/December issue of The Journal) will address how the department's transformed function is making a difference for all PG&E employees.