## Keynote presentations

### *The Changing World of Internal Communications:  James Harkness, HarknessKennett*

James' presentation explored why internal communications are changing, the shifting role of leadership communication, and the importance of linking internal communications to business strategy.

He began remembering that 'internal communications' until only five or six years ago meant the company newsletter; now it refers to a holistic approach to doing business.  He introduced the subjects he planned to cover:

- The changing world of internal communication;

- The role of leadership communication;

- Linking internal communication to your business strategy;

- Measurement.

**The Changing World of Internal Communication**

The role of internal communication is changing at a faster and faster pace.  The reasons, James suggested, are:

- the constant flow of new technologies;

- a more mobile workforce who change jobs frequently;

- higher expectations of social and ethical responsibilities;

- increasingly dispersed workforces; frequently people work in different sites, from home, at different hours or in other countries.

James proposed that the reasons that the role of internal communication was changing was directly linked to the fact that 'change' within and between organisations has not delivered the business advantages that were expected.  He cited the statistic that over 70 per cent of mergers and acquisitions activity in the last 20 years has failed to create any synergistic value.  In other words, most change processes and procedures fail to achieve results, and mostly fail early in the first phase of change by not establishing a great enough sense of urgency.

Chief executives rank communication as the number one oversight in change programmes[1]. The problem for managers is quantity and quality of information (a Gallup pole showed that managers in Britain receive on average 178 messages or documents a day, including 58 'phone calls, 23 e-mail messages, 21 voicemail messages and 15 faxes).  On the flip side, internal communication is also a problem for workers' who don't find the messages they receive from colleagues relevant or trustworthy.  James took the opportunity of listing the benefits of effective internal communication:

Effective communication can….

- Make implementation easier, faster and reduce resistance;

- Increase employee motivation;

- Reduce confusion and demonstrate clear leadership;

- Focus employee commitment on shared objectives;

- Create employee 'ambassadors';

- Improve cross-organisation working and knowledge sharing.

Gallup showed that where an internal communication programme focussed on improving the staff member's understanding of their role, there was a 22 per cent increase in productivity. Where the communication programme was about improving staff satisfaction, there was a 38 per cent increase in customer satisfaction; improving recognition resulted in a 27 per cent increase in profitability and where the communication programme was about improving relationships there was a 22 per cent reduction in employee turnover.

James then introduced the change (or bereavement) curve, illustrating the states that most pass through when change is forced upon them:

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[1] Watson Wyatt
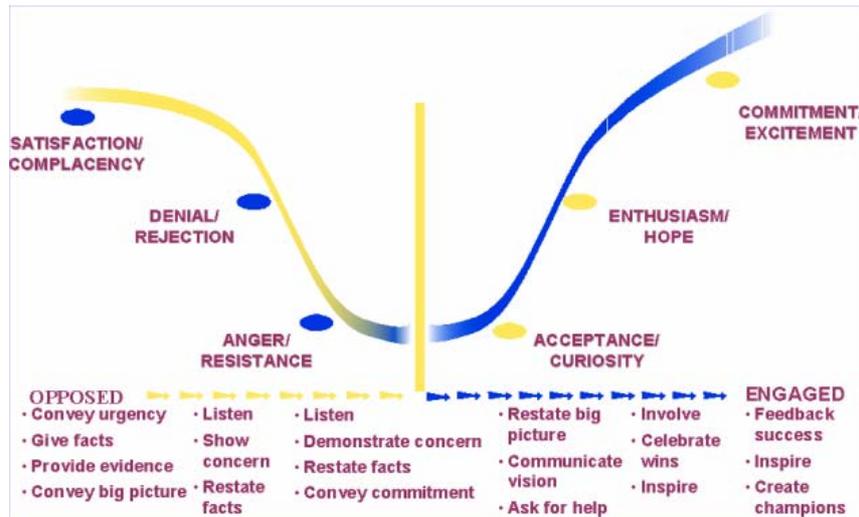
Below the curve are listed the different strategies that can be used to help staff through each stage of the change process.

**The role of leadership communication**

The role of leadership communication has changed.  Whereas leaders used to believe that information was power and that good and bad news should be kept from staff until a solution was ready (all characteristics of the command and control management style), what is now emerging is a style that encourages and shares feedback, provides a role model for vision, values and business priorities, integrates good and bad news and provides a context for communicated information.

Research continually demonstrates that front line managers are the preferred route for communicating with employees.  The majority of staff prefer to have changed communicated to them by their supervisor or line-manager (31 per cent), by the CEO or president (25 per cent), rather than a change management team member (7 per cent) or leader (6 per cent).

If front line managers are the key to internal communication then they need to be provided with the following:

- the opportunity to understand;

- their own cohort of peers;

- tools to support their communication – content and skills;

- performance measures;

- tools to measure impact;

- the support of senior management.

**Linking internal communications to your business strategy**

Internal communications is so valuable to business success, that our internal communications strategy should be part of the business plan.  James had suggestions as to how organisations could do this.

- Develop a big-picture communications goal;

- Define objectives that are measurable;

- Identify critical tactics – what do you want to say and to whom?

- Incorporate feedback;

- Understand the communication channels chosen ;

- Recognise limitations;

- Multiple channels may be necessary;

- Use the language of the recipient;

- Linking internal communications to 'business';

- Develop messaging architecture to directly support business strategy and goals;

- Secure high level ownership of the big picture goal and message architecture;

- Don't take a back seat … build internal communications into the business planning cycle;

- Solicit regular director involvement and input;

- Schedule monthly/quarterly internal message planning;

- Use every communications opportunity to 'live the strategy' and reinforce or challenge corporate culture.

**Measurement**

James works from the premise that what gets measured gets done.  He suggests that we develop specific measurement tools if insufficient data is available from existing mechanisms, which should combine quantitative and qualitative techniques.  Our measurement scales and tools should be aligned with existing tools such as employee opinion surveys (in terms of the content, process and timing), and appropriate tools should be developed for different work environments, e.g. phone polling for 'hard to reach' staff

member, online communications for offices.  His last piece of advice regarding measurement is that we should *always* communicate findings to staff members.

James signed off with five questions that he recommended the delegates consider in the light of their own organisations:

- What are your communications 'barriers'?

- How would your organisation gain if these barriers were broken down?

- How well are managers in your organisation supported to be good communicators?

- Does your organisation 'listen' to its people?

- How do people know your organisation listens?!

**Questions**

Q:  Box office and front of house staff are often out of touch with management.  What would you do to rectify this?

A:  At Marks and Spencer's, when shop floor staff were out of touch with management they decided to go into huddles at the beginning of each shift to build a sense of team spirit and senior managers visited stores all round the country to make themselves visible.

Q:  We've just been dragged through Investors in People and much to our embarrassment we passed.  Do you have any experience of this?

A:  What are *your* measures of success?  You need to consider how you are going to make it stick.

Q:  I'm particularly interested in the change curve that you showed.  Not everyone goes through the process at the same time, and others seem to want to stay in the middle, which can drag down the morale of the company.

A:  You have to accept that although most will go through the whole process, there will be people who simply will not move.  You have to decide where you are going to spend your resources – on those who are coming with you or on those who want to stay behind – convert enough of the others and they will do the work for you, or make things so uncomfortable for the non-movers that they move out.

Q:  Do you have any experience of those who work with freelance and contract staff?  How do we get them to buy in?

A:  Just understand what's in it for them, and their motivations.