Beyond "internal marketing" --
Best practices for engaging your own people

When you hear the phrase "internal communication," what thoughts come to mind? Staff meetings? Memos? An occasional newsletter, perhaps?

If so, maybe it's time to think again. For just as electricity powered the machines of the Industrial Age, internal communication fuels success in the Information Age. The best business leaders understand this. They view communication as a core business process. They invest in it. They nurture it. They make it a competitive advantage.

Why the growing focus on communication? Consider the rising importance of intellectual assets. In 1982, tangible assets represented roughly 60 percent of industrial firms' market values. Last year, estimates put the figure at just 10 to 15 percent. Today's biggest growth opportunities lie in leveraging intangible assets such as relationships, innovations, databases, and service quality. That means today's growth strategies are increasingly dependent on good communication.
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Next, there's the realization that most CEO failures stem not so much from flawed strategy as flawed execution. CEOs are realizing that if they fail to quickly get their employees aligned and engaged around new strategies, acquisitions, or other change initiatives, they fail, period.

Another driver is the growing focus on employee empowerment. To increase innovation and speed, you've got to decentralize power. Broader empowerment requires better information-sharing and a new level of internal dialog.

At the same time, companies are working more and more through teams, particularly cross-functional teams and, increasingly, geographically dispersed teams. This makes effective communication more important than ever.

Employee retention concerns are another factor. To recruit and keep the best talent, you need to create a culture people enjoy being part of. And we know that good communication – feeling that you're in the loop and in the know -- is typically among the top three dimensions of job satisfaction.

Beyond that, while good communication may be seen as a major plus by the "boomer" generation, it's more like a hygiene factor to the Net Generation talent we're pursuing. These web surfers are *accustomed* to user-centered, interactive experiences. They have an *expectation* of what information sharing should feel like and it requires us to do things differently.

They can't even fathom the type of "command and control" communication model many of us grew up with…the one that said, "We'll tell you what we want you to know when we want to tell you."

So…given all these forces pushing you to improve internal communication…how do you do it?

It's natural to think you get better internal communication through better communication products…like a newsletter or an intranet or more frequent staff meetings. Those can all be very helpful, but the real answer runs much deeper. So rather than just tick off a laundry list of tactics you can use, let me give you something more valuable: a new way of thinking about the communication process.

The most helpful way for a manager to think about internal communication is to see it as a six-layer pyramid. At the base is connecting. Then comes sharing, understanding, believing, owning, and – for those lucky enough to make it to the top – peak performance. The typical organization suffers lots of falloff at each level. The best ones help employees steadily climb to the top. Let's take a quick look at the key success drivers at each level.

Connecting means going where the audience's head is at, and tuning into to them on their wavelength. It's frightening to think about how much communication effort gets wasted because we're not even connecting. Those of us with teenagers experience this often. It happens just as often at work.

To connect with your employees (or anyone else) the keys are *listening* and *framing*.

There simply is no more powerful act of communication than listening well and often. It's the most empowering thing you can do – both for your employees and for yourself as a leader. I don't know how well "managing by walking around" works. But listening by walking around … and being genuinely interested in what people are up to and what they think … and drawing people out with good questions … and showing some patience and listening for the value in what people are expressing when they're not real articulate…this, I know, can work wonders.

If you need to put some structure around it, you can hold monthly brown-bag coffees or lunches for whoever wants to show up. And as long as YOU always show up, people will come to believe you when you say you really want to have two-way communication.

Once you've listened well, the next step is *framing*. By that I mean tailoring your communication to fit the receiver's frame of reference.
Most managers start the communication process by asking, "What's my message and how do I want to express it?" Great leaders ask, "Who's my audience, what's their frame of reference, and how can I tailor my message to fit their frame of reference?"

You can frame in terms of people's anxieties and how your message addresses them. Or people's dreams. Or their past experiences with the subject at hand.   One of the best ways to frame is by saying, in effect, "I've been listening to you and here's what I've heard. Let me tell you how we're responding to what you've told us."

Once you've established a connection, the next step is to share information efficiently and effectively. The two keys here are *simplicity* and *access*.

Whenever I think of the beauty and value of simplicity, I think of that famous comment by Abraham Lincoln, apologizing for a rambling speech. He said, "I would have written a shorter speech, but I didn't have time."

Simplicity takes more effort than complexity. Great communicators TAKE time to distill information to its essence, so it can be consumed as easily as possible. Making the complex clear always helps people work smarter. Because it is a lot easier to figure out what's important and ignore what isn't.

Quick thoughts on tactics for simplifying:
- Use pictures instead of words whenever possible. Be like USA Today. Use info-graphics that combine pie charts and graphs and tables with brief explanatory cutlines linking them. Sometimes you can even use drawings, like they do on the airline emergency card in your seat pocket.
- In your written communications, use headlines and subheads and cutlines and bullet-points in boxes to get away from lengthy narratives and reports.
- In any kind of lengthy communication, start with a summary paragraph explaining what it's about, who needs to do something about it, and why people should care.

The other key to sharing is *access*. Leading-edge companies know it's passé to hoard information and dole it out as management sees fit. We all grew up hearing, "Knowledge is power." But these days, knowledge is power only to the extent it's shared, leveraged and evolved by the people on your team. Because in and of itself, it gets dated very fast these days.

On the other hand, we want to share but not overload. A good strategy here is to combine so-called "push" communication -- like e-mail, meetings and newsletters -- with "pull" communication like an intranet or a library. Use a push vehicle to alert people and hit the highlights, then direct them to a pull vehicle for more detail if they so desire.

Once we've obtained awareness, the next challenge is often to create real **understanding**. The keys to understanding are *clarity* and *dialog*. Simplicity is one component of clarity. But when something is quite complex or otherwise subject to misinterpretation, you need to use some other tools. You need to realize that our minds don't all process information the same way. Some of us like to strip away the words and look at numbers on a spreadsheet. Most of us want concrete examples.

We almost all find it very helpful when you can use just the right analogy to explain something foreign by comparing it to something familiar. And, of course, a picture really is worth a thousand words. Almost without exception, people have an easier time grasping a concept when it's expressed graphically rather than verbally.

In fact, the very best way to get clear on a business strategy or a process flow or just about any other complex subject is for a group to work *together* to draw a picture of it. If you have people do this individually first, you'll be amazed at how different people's mental picture of the very same thing can be. That's why, after you think you've all agreed on something at a meeting, you sometimes wonder later on…was he at the same meeting I was at? By literally drawing a picture together, you're creating a shared mental model, which is to say you're creating a shared understanding.

Dialog is the other key to understanding. I'll never know if you really understood me unless I give you a chance to tell me what you heard, and ask questions and express confusion or doubts. And a leader doesn't get open, honest dialog by delivering a presentation and then turning to the audience and asking, "Any questions?" We need to be more creative than that.

If you sometimes feel people are withholding their views or concerns, there are all sorts of ways to design meeting formats to make them feel more comfortable. Here's one example: After a presentation, break a group into smaller groups and have participants take turns answering four questions: What excites you about what you just heard? What confuses you? What concerns you? How might we improve upon it?…Then have a recorder report the top answers to each question.

There are ways to minimize the power dynamic in a meeting so that junior people, or folks who are less articulate, are more apt to speak up. For example, have each person take a few moments to gather their thoughts and write down some reflections or questions, then go around the room to hear from everyone.

Eventually, you want a culture where you don't have to routinely resort to these devices because everyone feels comfortable speaking up. But going out of your way to creatively engage employees in dialog sends a message: Their voice is valued.

Once you've achieved understanding, the next hurdle is often to win **belief**. To gain belief, the best leaders typically apply three key principles: *transparency, alignment* and *metrics*.

Transparency is such a powerful concept. Think of it this way: Traditionally, we managers have engaged in what you might call "black-box decision making." We gather behind closed doors, sometimes for weeks on end, then emerge to announce some momentous decision or plan. We do a sales pitch on its merits and assure employees it's in their best interest. It's the "trust us – would we lie to you" school of internal marketing. Increasingly, employees greet us with skepticism.

Leading-edge organizations are shifting to what you might call "glass box decision-making," where they walk employees through each key step in the trail of facts, logic and choices that led to the ultimate decision so that people can decide for themselves – which of course, they will anyway – whether the outcome makes sense.

The next key is *alignment*. If we want people to believe, we've got to walk the talk and align what we do with what we say. Think of an iceberg. What's immediately visible is what we say: Our vision, our strategy, our stated priorities. But underneath are all the systems and structures that either support or contradict those things. The compensation system, training programs or the lack thereof, the way we track information…

If these aren't pointing toward where we say we want to go, we're not credible. So here's a great exercise for you: At your management committee meetings, take one piece of the business at a time and do a little "alignment audit." What are we doing in HR, for example, that's highly supportive of the strategy? What are we doing that may send a different signal?

You may think I'm going way beyond communication here. But the fact is, our policies, practices and day-to-day decisions send much more powerful messages than any formal communication we employ.

Finally, if you really want to drive credibility, pick a handful of key performance metrics and organize all your communication around them.
Structure every meeting agenda around your three, four or five key metrics. Structure your reward and recognition programs around them. Track them very visibly. Tie everyone's performance objectives to them. This kind of fact-based communication is the antidote to the Dilbert syndrome of employee cynicism and apathy.

The ultimate challenge is to nurture a sense of personal **ownership** in the business. You don't need to go for this one every time. People will do a lot for you because they're getting paid and they want to be a team player. But sometimes, you really need people to feel personally invested, because you need them to take a lot of independent initiative. When you're shooting for ownership, the key is _involvement_.

Speaking as an employee…I can understand your vision, I can believe you've got the right strategy to achieve it, but I'm never going to personally own it unless you've given me a real opportunity to put my fingerprints on it. The best way to get people to own a new strategy or some other change we're asking them to make is to involve them early in the planning process, and then periodically throughout the process.

Now this is the point where some of my manager friends roll their eyes and say, "That's very nice, Anne, but time is money and we're not running a democracy." To which I say it's a "pay me now or pay me later" situation. Get the right involvement on the front end or lose time and money on the back end as you struggle with passive resistance, misunderstanding and fear of the unknown.

Involvement <u>can</u> be accomplished, effectively and efficiently. It takes planning and creativity, but it yields better plans and faster execution. Today's best-practice companies are using a

variety of practical tools and tactics to engage employees in brainstorming and decision-making about changes they will be responsible for implementing.

In conclusion: If you can help your people connect, share, understand, believe and own their part of the business, you'll communicate the most important message of all: We're not just saying our people are our most important asset; we're fully valuing and leveraging that asset to yield a *big* competitive advantage.