The Logic of Effective Employee Communication

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This article is based on the presentation by James Hanley, CEBS, at the 2019 Symposium.

The No. 1 problem with employee communication is too much information.

To improve the effectiveness of your employee communication, take a look at the following 59 steps. Kidding. Let’s follow the lead of James Hanley, CEBS, president of EeComm, Inc., in Muskegon, Michigan, and distill these lessons into six simple steps:

1. Organizational objectives
2. Audiences
3. Communication objectives
4. Key messages
5. Elements/vehicles

Step 1: Organizational Objectives
Your employee communication strategy should always start with this question: Why is the success of this communication effort important to the success of our organization?

There are reasons you’ve been given the accountability and responsibility to effect change within your organization, Hanley noted. Begin your communication effort with clarification of those reasons.

Step 2: Audiences
To determine the proper audience(s), ask yourself: Whose understanding, beliefs or actions will we influence as a result of our communication and education efforts? What do we know about these audiences?

In turn, these questions will lead to corollary questions. Who is the primary audience? What subsets exist for the primary audience? Who might have influence on the primary audience? Key audiences and their subsets often include employees, spouses, domestic partners and other family members.

Step 3: Communication Objectives
Discuss and document the following question for Step 3: For the campaign to be successful, what must the primary audience members do, say or believe as a result of the communications?

The logic of progressive communication objectives follows a pattern from awareness to understanding to acceptance to engagement. For example, an audience will first be made aware that enrollment is required. Then the audience will be ready to understand the enrollment process and deadlines, which must happen before the audience will accept that it is in their best interests to actively enroll. Finally, the audience will be primed to take action to enroll in a timely manner.

Hanley points out that the logical progression of communication objectives—awareness to understanding to acceptance to engagement—is generally in chronological order, a characteristic that will help with timing considerations (Step 6).

Step 4: Key Messages
Your key message begins with defining your objective and then determining the most important message(s) that must be effectively communicated for the given objective to be attained.

For example, an objective could be having your human resources (HR) representatives be aware that all benefit-eligible employees must complete a timely annual enrollment for next year’s benefit coverage. Your corresponding key messages would then include the following.

- This year’s annual enrollment period for benefits will begin at 12:01 a.m. on November 1 and will close at 12:00 midnight on November 15.
- All employees must successfully complete an online annual enrollment during the annual enrollment period.

Hanley stresses the importance of ensuring messages directly support communication objectives. For example, annual benefits enrollment materials may seem like an opportunity to deliver messages about flu shots, parking rules, smartphone policies, etc., but such messages will be at the expense of those that actually support the objectives at hand.

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Step 5: Elements/Vehicles

How your communication is conveyed is another important step. That said, Hanley notes that there is not a hard and fast rule for a certain number of vehicles being too few or too many.

“I’m a big fan of repeating messages,” Hanley said. “Four vehicles with the same key message are better than four vehicles with four different messages.”

Possible communication elements/vehicles include but are not limited to the following:

- Annual/periodic “town hall” meetings
- Brochures
- Brown-bag presentations
- Bulletin board postings
- Electronic newsletters
- Fliers
- Floor clings
- Frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- Group discussions
- Home mailings
- Manager tool kits
- Opt-in text messages
- Personalized statements
- Special meetings
- Surveys
- Targeted emails
- Webinars
- Website/micro site
- Videos.

Step 6: Timing

Hanley suggests developing a detailed work plan outlining the process for developing each vehicle from beginning to end. For example, if a postcard is set to be mailed on November 30, you might work backward to document the date and timing for each prerequisite step in the process. Be sure to include what is being done (e.g., the first draft of the postcard), who is doing it (e.g., Sally is completing the first draft) and when it will be accomplished (e.g., the first draft will be completed by November 1).

Conclusion

Communication is really about logic. Individuals can be influenced to believe, say and do things in a timely manner when we effectively convey the appropriate information.

By following these six steps, you can help to minimize information overload, capture and hold attention, ensure the consistent delivery of appropriate messages and coordinate messages across your organization.