

Things About Communications You Wish Every Executive Knew (and Did Well)

An IdeaPACK
for Fearless Communicators



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Special Offer



Welcome

Simply put, if you are accountable for managing *any* employee communications issues – whether you have ‘communications’ in your official job title or not – this IdeaPACK has actionable advice that will make your employee communications stronger.

To accomplish this goal, the topics explored in this IdeaPACK help you guide your executives regardless of their communications skills or their enthusiasm to communicate with employees better.

The result: You help them discover how to communicate in ways that effectively align, engage and inspire employees so your organization is more agile and more competitive. And, that should make your life a little easier too.

Topics explored in this IdeaPACK, include:

- How Executives Can Build a Brand as a Strong Leader Inside an Organization
- How Executives Can Repair Their Broken Brands Within an Organization
- How Executives Can Inspire Employees During Tough Times

Please note: To ‘prime’ your senior management quickly, these three topics are written in short, easily-digestible articles – and *directly to* executives. So, when it is appropriate, you can share each article with them without needing to do any re-writing.

For those executives who will question the relevance of these topics to *them*, feel free to highlight that much of this content was published in the *Financial Post* ***because the insights/activities helped executives from across industries measurably improve employee communications.***

All IdeaPACKs are regularly updated taking into account the ways their insights are used in today’s rapidly evolving organizations. We invite you to share with us how you use the insights found in this IdeaPACK. Doing so allows us to ensure it remains effective for other *Fearless Communicators* just like you.

We are honoured that you have chosen us as your guides on the journey of making your employee communications authentic, awesome and aligned.

Andrew Brown and Elizabeth Williams
Founders of The Academy of Business Communications



ONE

How Executives Can Build a Brand as a Strong Leader Inside an Organization

How Executives Can Build a Brand as a Strong Leader Inside an Organization

Establishing a reputation as a strong leader within your organization means taking steps to be seen as equally reputable beyond your company's corridors.

As an executive, you gain a tremendous advantage over those competitors who don't sustain a strong brand within their companies. For example, when your employees believe that you are a powerful leader they are more likely to: feel positive about the direction of the company; feel empowered to innovate; spend less time looking for other employment; enthusiastically recruit other talented professionals; adhere to important policies; and identify opportunities for operational improvement.

To create and sustain a brand as a strong leader within a business, executives should follow these **three** core practices:

Focus your activities. Senior leaders often find themselves drawn into tactical issues. This happens during the planning or implementation of important initiatives such as launching new products, pursuing large prospective clients or wooing high-profile executives. However, focusing too much on tactical issues could hurt an executive's reputation. In fact, leaders quickly risk being seen as getting in the way of moving projects forward, slowing down innovation and taking resources away from company-wide priorities. The lesson here: Ask yourself whether a member of your management team is better suited to dealing with the initiative than you are. If not, either secure or train a member of your team so that you, as a member of the C-suite, can keep out of day-to-day issues. You should be focusing your activities on those issues where your attention is needed to ensure the long-term health of your business.

Align your external and internal communications. Ironically, to be seen as a strong leader within a company by its employees, leaders need to devote time building a reputation as a leader outside of the company. To do so effectively means ensuring that those professionals who are responsible for building your public reputation — ghost-writers, speech writers and social media liaisons — work closely with those people who promote your activities within the company. At the same time, leaders need to tap into their executive teams' credibility. Within your company, your senior colleagues play a tremendous role in reinforcing and amplifying the messages that you, and by extension the company, are an important player in the industry.

Demonstrate your humanity. Executives have abandoned the notion that in order to be effective they need to be taskmasters who lead by fear and intimidation. Today's executive has embraced the need to be an effective magnet for talented people, for resources that fund continued growth and for strategic alliances. To successfully attract these elements, leaders must demonstrate their humanity. For example, make sure that you look for opportunities to share stories about your family and out-of-work passions. Also find opportunities to display other positive human attributes such as generosity and compassion. Openly recognizing and rewarding members of your company who embody key corporate values accomplishes this while reinforcing the organizational culture. Getting involved in fundraising activities that you genuinely feel are worthy of your time and support demonstrates to others your commitment to the public good.

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TWO

How Executives Can Repair Their Broken Brands Within an Organization

How Executives Can Repair Their Broken Brands Within an Organization

The tarnishing of an executive's personal brand within an organization can have a profound impact on their company's performance. Minimizing the damage requires strategy, forethought and stamina.

Having a strong brand as a leader within a company, produces significant business benefits. That's why it's so important to methodically build and protect your brand as a strong leader. If that brand suffers a setback, your company feels real pain. For example, employees lose confidence in the direction of the company; they spend time looking for other employment opportunities; their desire to innovate decreases; and they cease being strong advocates for your business.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether the damage to your reputation is caused by you or by circumstances beyond your control. The bottom line is that your credibility is on the line and you need to turn perceptions around quickly or your ability to operate as an effective leader will be significantly hampered. If your leader brand is broken, here are three guidelines to repair it:

Assess the damage. When your reputation as a leader takes a hit, it's equivalent to either a dent in the fender or a complete write-off. Repairing it depends largely on the depth of the damage. Consider the following scenario: your company is undergoing a drastic restructuring. You and your executive team share with your company an evolving vision and possible scenarios. Questions are answered genuinely with compassion and with the information that is available and sharable. You have one-on-one discussions with influencers and people who have been with the company for years to address their concerns. The approach taken is that everyone has contributed to the company's success and will continue to do so in the short- and long-term. When the reorganization is finally made public, there are some major gaps between what was discussed and the final outcomes. However, the damage to your reputation will be limited because of your pre-planning, managing expectations, active listening and leveraging the executive team. As a result, your reputation is tarnished but not irreparably so.

In contrast, consider the senior executive who publicly announces the launch of a new product and mobilizes considerable company resources to ensure it comes to market with tremendous fanfare. Furthermore, the executive, while hinging future growth on the success of the product, downplays dissenting opinions and neglects internally established processes for mitigating risks. This kind of single-mindedness, even with the best intentions, sets the stage for a complete reputation write-off if the company's targeted expectations for the product are not achieved.

Choose the right mechanics. Executives are committed, action-oriented and energetic professionals who are comfortable with taking ownership. So, the idea of refraining from jumping in to repair the damage to their reputation within their own company is a painful proposition. And, in truth, they need to be involved. However, the best strategy is for senior executives to engage their core management team. If the success of social media and social networking has reinforced one message it is this: the credibility of the channel trumps the attractiveness of the message. As a result, use your team as your eyes, your ears and your voice. While they are not charged with making excuses or candy-coating issues, they are responsible for explaining context and providing additional clarification. They should also provide a strong supporting voice that demonstrates that there is unwavering confidence for decisions made and the processes used. Finally, they should reinforce the humanity of the senior executive whose reputation has been damaged.

Drive carefully. Successfully repairing a damaged reputation takes time. And, while it shouldn't slow down any senior executive's activities, it will shape which initiatives they should participate in and how these are framed. At the same time, they should look to leverage the credibility that comes from sources external to the company. This includes involving well-respected individuals who have left the company, key industry leaders and the media to portray the senior executive in a more positive light. Finally, senior executives should be seen as taking charge of positive and successful initiatives as well as actively participating in popular company events.

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THREE

How Executives Can Inspire Employees During Tough Times

How Executives Can Inspire Employees During Tough Times

News of corporate upheaval can dampen morale even in the most successful and motivating corporate cultures. Avoiding upheaval entirely may be impossible but how it's communicated to staff can go a long way toward helping the company bounce back.

Loss of clients, bad publicity, lower than expected sales, painful restructuring or investment in product lines that don't succeed — the truth is that bad things do happen to good businesses. To overcome adversity, company leaders need to repair their reputations within their company as well as inspire their teams. Here are some key guidelines to do so effectively:

Watch for the warning signs. When a business goes through a dramatic upheaval, the leader often has some advance notice. That time period allows them to accept and deal with the misfortune before it becomes widely known. As a result, the leader emerges ready to take on the next challenge. But, for the vast majority of employees, when the bad news surfaces it can be a sudden and unpleasant surprise.

That means that leaders need to be attuned to the warning signs that their employees are grappling with the upheaval. Such signs include a steep increase in the number of meetings coupled with reduced productivity in meetings because of a reluctance to make decisions (i.e. "Let's see what happens next"). Other signs include an upsurge in rumours, people openly questioning authority and valued staff leaving. Indicators can also come from external sources that have received bits of information from within the company. Such signs include suppliers who, for no apparent reason, demand payments faster than usual or long-standing clients who are reluctant to renew contracts.

Acknowledge the causes of concern. Recognizing the warning signs is the first step in developing a communications approach for inspiring your team during tough times. But, it's just as important to acknowledge two core reasons *why* the upheaval causes such personal disruption. First, bad news at work is a blatant reminder that uncertainty exists even in settings where there are established processes, routines and predictability. People deal with ambiguity in various ways — often dysfunctionally — in an attempt to find the comfort and security that comes with establishing certainty. At work, such unproductive behaviour takes the form of people jumping to fast and spurious conclusions and being easily distracted from important priorities.

The second element that emerges from a dramatic upheaval at work is the feeling of loss of control. When your employees feel that their ability to control their own areas of responsibility is reduced, they will emotionally disconnect from projects or teams that once served as a sense of pride and satisfaction.

Take charge. To inspire employees under these difficult conditions, leaders can take several concrete steps. For example, to address the fear of uncertainty, leaders should proactively emphasize those things that are stable such as corporate goals and priorities. This is also a great time to hone your story telling skills and play up work done with long-standing clients — i.e. those who have seen your company undergo changes but have maintained their faith in your products, services and leadership. You can also use this as an opportunity to acknowledge employees who have been with the company for several years.

In parallel, you will need to address the feeling of reduced control. One of the best ways to do so is to actively engage your team as part of your communications strategy. For example, empower them with the responsibility for updating the rest of the company about how they and their teams are contributing to the success of the business. This reinforces for them that they play an important role whether that involves making the company run more effectively, finding great new employees, securing new business, developing innovative products/services or gathering key market insights. It also gives members of your team the opportunity to take control over sharing valuable news with others.

Finally, there are some tactics that leaders need to avoid in order to make sure that their communications inspire employees during tough times instead of alienating them. These include the following:

- **Don't rely on email for announcing dramatic upheavals.** Rather, make those announcements in person. Only use email to summarize key points and reinforce the message that you and/or your executive team are available to answer questions and address concerns.
- **Don't be impersonal.** Regardless of your personal brand, demonstrate your humanity and compassion. Leaders who openly share how they feel about tough times are respected and inspire confidence far more than those who don't.
- **Don't delegate difficult communications.** Most leaders would prefer to bring "good news" to their teams. However, the fact is that you can strengthen your leadership brand by dealing honestly and decisively with painful issues.



SPECIAL OFFER

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