

CEO-on-Message: Critical Communications Practices that Get Results

The connection and sense of community that can grow between a CEO and his or her organization's employees is one of the most overlooked points of leverage that a business can tap into for generating results. Your company's bottom line depends on the people on your front lines, the individuals meeting your customers each and every day, the people creating the products and systems that are the heart of your business. Today you, as CEO, need to stay close, personal, and relevant to your constituents—your employees. How? Great communications practices can narrow the chasm that appears to separate you as CEO from your front line workers. Great communications are at the heart of leveraging your team to accomplish the organization's goals, grow your business, and generate results.

These recommended best communications practices were developed, tested, and measured on the front lines of a premiere community bank over a period of five years. During this time, the bank restructured, doubled its income without increasing headcount, and made the FORTUNE 100 Best Companies to Work For list. I served as the head of communications during this period and partnered with the president on his and the organization's key messages. We validated and refined these six critical communications practices that will help you stay on message, connect with your people and generate results from your team.

1) Partner with your internal communication professionals.

If you asked someone to prepare a gourmet meal, you probably wouldn't assign the person to a small kitchen with an empty refrigerator far from

where the meal was to be served. Too many organizations bury their communication team members deep within the human resource department. In addition, neither HR nor Communication teams are typically in the “inner circle.” The tendency is to relegate them to getting key strategic information on a need-to-know basis. As a result, your key communicators are the last to find out about big organizational shifts in strategy – and then you assign them the responsibility for telling the story to the rest of the organization. Make them your partners instead. You'll increase the effectiveness of your communications exponentially.

2) Identify a writer who can help you craft your signature voice.

As CEO, you strive for communications that sound just like you -- and only you. You want employee reaction to be, “Yep, that sounds just like _____!” Whether you work with a member of your internal team or an outside consultant, as a busy CEO, you need a partner to help craft messages that communicate in your signature voice. You want to achieve a consistency in tone, attitude, humor, and direction. Too many CEO communications sound disconnected. The audience assumes the pieces were written by one of the internal HR or communication professionals. If this happens, you lose the potency and credibility of the message. Think of your communications as fodder for a book you will write one day. Commit to making every memo, letter, or strategy document a gem of clarity, conviction and a classic expression of YOU.

3) Create a platform for your message at least monthly.

As CEO, your voice needs to be heard on a consistent basis. Your employees need to be able to "Count on it." Whether that regular outreach is through a column in a monthly newsletter, a section on the home page of the intranet or a podcast --to name just a few of the possible communication vehicles-- employees need to know there is a specific place where they can find your thoughts, your direction, your pulse for the month.

4) Facilitate two-way forums whenever possible.

While a monthly message provides employees with direction, an interactive and in-person event can personalize the connection. Create a forum where employees can ask questions and provide you with feedback from the front lines. Such regular interchanges are invaluable for building community. As a leader, your time is always at a premium for this type of event. However, the value of the interaction will far outweigh scheduling challenges. When you travel, create at least one, "Breakfast with the CEO," "Lunch with the President," or "Afternoon Coffee with Your Leader" opportunity. Managers can use this invitation as a "reward" for employees who have excelled or achieved milestones. While the breakfast or lunch may only accommodate 10 – 20 people, the ripple effect travels way beyond this small group. One attendee tells a colleague about the event and what was discussed. Suddenly the 20 who attended have shared your candor and commitment with a hundred more.

5) Cascade your messages.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "The problem with communication ... is the *illusion* that it has been accomplished." You cannot speak one-to-one with every employee in your organization -- but your managers can. Your job is not only to solidify the message and/or call to action for your people, but it is also to enlist your direct reports – who enlist theirs – who enlist theirs -- to cascade the message quickly throughout the organization. This can be done simply. For example: Your monthly column comes out on the 5th of every month in the company newsletter. Send an advance copy to your direct reports summarizing the essence of the column into a sentence or two. Ask them to share the message with their managers and deliver the message in person to their teams within 72 hours. (This can occur at a weekly staff meeting, impromptu Monday morning "huddle," etc.)

6) Surprise and diversify.

Today your audience is accustomed to rapid-fire communication where news is accessible to us anywhere, anytime. The more you can model that level of timeliness and transparency, the better. Work with your communication

and HR colleagues to provide opportunities for you to surprise your employees through diverse communication channels. Examples include:

- A 60-second broadcast voicemail with a pertinent reminder for all employees. Or consider one that asks a provocative question to get people thinking – and talking!
- A 90-minute online chat where everyone can dial in while the CEO fields questions.
- A podcast interview.
- A brief video message posted on the intranet.

As Anne Morrow Lindbergh said, “Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.” Make your efforts not only informative but exciting as well.

As CEO you are time-challenged. Everyone wants a piece of you. With time limitations, remember the importance of using smart communication practices and partners to spread yourself and your message over the largest territory possible in the most time-economical fashion. The benefits of connecting with your employees, in varied and meaningful ways, will help you leverage your company's most valuable resource—your people—to achieve its goals. There is nothing more rewarding for a leader than not only to be respected, but also to be loved. Being loved and appreciated within your organization is crucial to getting people to follow you. Getting people to follow you is all about communicating effectively, demanding transparency, cascading messages, and making yourself available. Find the partners who will help you leverage your vision and mission into potent relationship-building, results-getting communications.