



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

Employee Communication Is Different: A Guide to Internal Exec Comms for Tumultuous Times

Exec comms folks have traditionally focused on external communication. Now internal comms is at the core of your job. Here's how to do it—sustainably, fruitfully and happily.

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Employee communication: Until very recently, executive communication professionals have viewed it as a thankless chore at best and the bane of their existence at worst.

There was no upside to it. A CEO could kill at Davos if she said anything the least bit novel, but she couldn't knock 'em dead at an employee town hall unless she announced an across-the-board raise.

Worse yet, internal communications often involved those humorless drudges from human resources, with their gibberish about "employee engagement scores," and other technocratic concepts you know to be nonsense.

And anyway, what kind of "authentic" CEO needs your help to say a few words at the employee brown bag lunch?

Yeah, then COVID. Then George Floyd.

And suddenly almost all exec comms became internal comms. A recent survey by the Executive Communication Council asked exec comms pros which audiences they are "urgently responsible to influence through executive communications." Employees far outstripped all other audiences. Asked how they spent the first three months since COVID began, 38% of exec comms pros said they're "primarily focused on internal communications," and 49% said "pulled in all directions to meet stakeholders' needs." Only 13% of these traditionally employee-eschewing exec comms pros said they were "primarily focused on external audiences."

And now, as organizations and their leaders and their employees face a foreseeable un-seeable future of economic crisis, health crisis, social upheaval and business transformation—all with an inevitably cataclysmic presidential election within the beams of their headlights—you know what I'm hearing from exec comms folks?

"We don't know what's left to say to employees."

That's because you don't know what employee communication is supposed to do. (Don't feel bad. Lots of employee communication people don't know that, either.)

This white paper will explain.

What Is Employee Communication For, Exactly—and Where Do Leaders Come Into It?

I've been around employee communications for long enough to have founded a *Journal of Employee Communication Management*, once successful and now defunct. And I've been around executive communications since speechwriters smoked pipes.

I've seen the power of both disciplines, and often been frustrated by the dissipated potential that results from their being at cross purposes.

In these next tumultuous years, realizing that potential will be essential. But it won't happen until exec comms pros come to understand and appreciate the largest purposes of employee communication.

Compelling employee communication requires thoughtful and heartfelt executive communication. Several years ago, I wrote something I grandly called, "Murray's Manifesto." It's brief, as manifestos go.

What exactly do employees want to know?

They want to know what kind of people they are working for.

Let me repeat: They want to know what kind of people they are working for.

That's all they want to know: What kind of people they are working for.

But that's a lot: They want to know how smart are the people they're working for. How honest. How empathetic. How interested in new ideas. How down to earth. How consistent. How careful. How generous of spirit. How forward-looking. And how committed to the welfare of the employees.

Seriously. That's all they want to know. You may want to give them other kinds of information, and they may be pleased to get it.

But if you can convince your employees that the people who run the organization are fine human beings who care about what they're doing ... well, that's a team employees will find a way to help.

And if you lack the communication ability to get that across (virtuous executives not included)?

You'd better dance fast.

One CEO discovered this concept without the help of his communication helpers. Harry Herington is chairman of NIC, Inc., an online service provider. Interviewed a few years ago in *The New York Times*, Herington talked about how he changed the way his employees saw him, and in the process transformed his “entire perspective” about how to communicate with them: He showed them his motorcycle.

Shortly after Herington had bought a Harley, the company was organizing a conference of its general managers.

I had 200 employees in Oklahoma City for a marketing conference and I thought, I’ve got this brand new motorcycle. It’s about a six-hour drive from our headquarters near Kansas City. I decided to ride the motorcycle to the conference.

So I pull up and I’ve got all my leathers on. I walk in carrying my helmet and everybody’s dumbfounded. I became the buzz of the conference. The next thing I know, everybody’s out looking at my bike. I had so many fingerprints on it because the employees were just swarming this bike. They thought it was the coolest thing.

I started riding it to our offices in different states. I’d take everyone to dinner, and they would ask me why I bought a motorcycle, and then we would start talking casually about the company. I thought, “Wow, this is a very comfortable, easy setting.” I started getting phone calls from my general managers in different cities, saying, “We want you to come visit us on the motorcycle. The employees think this is really cool.”

So he started an “Ask the CEO” forum—you know, the kind of employee town hall where nobody says anything except the Eddie Haskell character who wants to prove how smart he is. Except, in Herington’s meetings,

They were asking me all sorts of personal questions, and it kind of got everybody’s guard down, so they felt more comfortable.

I had expected people to ask me about our five-year strategy. But I started getting questions like: “Where did you go to school?” ... “Why did you get into law enforcement?” “Why did you leave law enforcement?” “How many kids do you have?” I’m on Facebook a lot, too. So people would say, “I see that you like to wear pink shirts when you play golf. Why?”

I would say, especially early on, 80 percent of the questions were personal and 20 percent were about business.

Why?

They want to trust the leadership. They want to trust that you're making the right decisions. And it's not so much whether you're making the right decisions as far as strategy. It's more, can they trust you to come up with the strategy, and to make the right decisions when issues come before you? They want to know the person. They want to trust the person. That was interesting. That really changed my entire perspective. ...

But that's not a new perspective. It's an old one.

The first important book ever written on employee communication—titled plainly, *Sharing Information with Employees* and published in 1942—reminds us of what work was like before formal employee communication and executive communication were necessary. Author Alexander Heron describes what he calls “the old understanding.”

We might find our picture of the old understanding in a wagon shop, a grist mill, a cotton mill, a pottery or cutlery shop. Let us find it in a furniture shop. Perhaps eight men work there. One of them is the boss. He owns the shop, but he works there, visibly. The other seven receive wages. The work done by the boss is not all done with tools; sometimes he uses a pencil. He draws designs, writes occasional letters, puts down figures about wages, costs, and prices.

The other seven know, quite closely, how much money the boss had saved up from his earnings as a journeyman before he started in business for himself; in other words, how much “capital” he had and how long it took him to save it up. The shop or factory is on the same lot as the house where the boss lives; he owns it. The other seven know how much his taxes are each year. They helped to build the ten-by-thirty addition to the shop last year, and they know how much that cost. They were all in on the discussion before the new lathe was bought, and they remember the price and the freight. They remember how the boss borrowed some of the money from his wife's sister.

They know that the dining room “suite” on which they are working now is for Jane Winton, [who] used to be Jane Carey, the schoolteacher, before she married Bill Winton, the banker. They know it has to be as good as the furniture she saw in Buffalo, and that if it is good Bill's mother is going to give the boss an order for another lot which will keep them all busy through the winter.

They see the finished job emerging under their skilled hands, day by day. They know how difficult it was to get the seasoned walnut, and what it finally cost, what price is to be paid for the finished job, how much the boss will “make” on it, and how much of that will go to pay off the loan

from the sister-in-law.

They know that the boss has gradually built a reputation for honest quality and skilled workmanship and that they are part of that reputation. They know why once in a while they have had to wait a little for their wages—when the taxes had to be paid before the money came in for the new counter and fixtures at the drugstore.

Above all, they know the boss. Their attachment to him is basically not sentimental but practical. He is the salesman who gets the orders which bring work to them. He collects the money which pays their wages. He manages to accumulate the working space and the equipment. They are realistic enough to know that they can get their full and fair share of the income of the business. They laugh at anyone who talks of the conflict between labor and capital, between them and the boss.

They know. Because they know, they understand. And in that full and simple understanding they “put themselves” into every job.

Now, of course Heron, a corporate labor relations executive at the time, understands that big companies are not furniture shops. But he argues that, to whatever extent possible, they must be made to feel like the shop he describes. Employees need an understanding of the basic economics of their business, who the customers are, who the competition is, what the expectation of quality is and—this is where exec comms pros are needed to help—what kind of person the boss is.

The highest purpose of employee communication, as Alexander Heron describes it, is nothing short of what he calls “the American idea”:

The deliberate effort to share business information with the great majority who work for wages corresponds closely to the deliberate plan to make education freely available to the people.

... we have all of us, every adult citizen, been jointly and equally entrusted with the government of our nation, state, and city. That government is increasingly engaged in the protection and regulation of the economic interests of all of us. It is inconceivable that the ... millions of us who work for wages can do a good job, or even a safe job, of governing by votes, without knowing more and more about our economic interests.

The American idea has no place for a class predestined to be wage earners incapable of understanding a world beyond the workbench, no place for a class which is denied the opportunity to reason its conclusions on facts which it helps to create, no place for a class which is happier

because ignorant of anything beyond the daily task. And those whose sense of superiority leads them to believe in either the necessity or the desirability of such classes are themselves enemies of the American idea or ignorant of its genius.

Heron concludes that, to the extent employee communication succeeds, it will “have restored the living, understanding relationship into which our grandfathers put their strength and interest, because they knew, and understood!”

When we talk about “stakeholder capitalism,” the stakeholders with whom we have the most intense and consequential relationship are employees.

Don't we want them to be the most understanding stakeholders they can be?

How Can Executive Communications Create More Thoughtful, Sympathetic Employees?

Your executives—not just the CEO, but many top leaders in the organization—should be daily engaged in whichever of the items below they are emotionally and intellectually equipped to handle.

- **Expressing themselves to employees as living, breathing people**—sharing with employees their own humanity, and how it connects with the content of the work they do, and the culture of the organization where they do it.
- **Striving to understand employees more deeply, in the same way.** Leaders should be privately and publicly interviewing employees from all corners of the organization, about what they do, how they do it, what they take pride in, what makes them tick.
- **Helping employees understand the economics of the organization, its role in the marketplace, its social impact**—all those factors evolving quickly in the era of COVID. Not simply lecturing from on high, CEOs should conduct public conversations with industry observers, economists and other relevant thinkers.
- **Having gnarly, ongoing discussions about the toughest topics:** Race, layoffs, safety tradeoffs. Among executives, with employees, and with outside voices who can shed light and new perspective.
- **Publicly learning, exchanging ideas with epidemiologists, social scientists and other thinkers** in a time of real social uncertainty, demonstrating an unending eagerness to discuss ideas without knowing the answer. “Turn all eyes outward,” said Roger D’Aprix, another father of internal communication.

At big virtual meetings or intimate Zoom calls, as many execs as you support

should be spending as much time as they can possibly afford making life in the organization more human, more understandable, more dynamic and more meaningful.

And you should be helping facilitate all that.

Now: If you take all *that* as your responsibility, the question isn't so much, "What's left to say?" It's "Where do we begin?"

At least three members of the Executive Communication Council have already begun.

UPS exec comms director Dean Foust took all that as his responsibility several years ago, and the result was TED@UPS, where people from senior executives to truck drivers stood and delivered truths about their work for employees and the rest of the world to hear. A UPS pilot shared the story of her mid-career gender transformation and a corporate speechwriter told business people "How to Get Serious About Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace."

Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg conducted a town hall with 130,000 employees every day for the first couple of months of COVID, and he still spends an incredibly high percentage of his time communicating with them.

And most recently: Splunk is a data analytics software company based in San Francisco. They have a charismatic, outspoken CEO who they could rely on to speak the truth to employees early in the crisis. During a barely perceptible summer lull, the exec comms folks at Splunk took the chance to "step back and think about our company's all-up exec comms strategies," says Melanie Duzyj, senior manager of executive communications at Splunk (which is a founding member of the Executive Communication Council). "No doubt, when COVID happened, and then again as the social justice movement hit organizations like a wrecking ball, our Exec Comms team hustled to increase our comms cadence internally and externally while spending long evenings editing with our executives who wanted to say and do the right thing," Duzyj says.

As the wailing crisis sirens died down and summer set in, "Our team took this time to re-evaluate the way we're communicating priority company messaging," Duzyj said.

Understanding that the CEO and the other top execs couldn't and shouldn't carry the exec comms load entirely, Duzyj's team expanded the number of execs it supports more than 20 over a period of six weeks.

"We had always recognized that it was important to mobilize a greater group of thought leaders around our priority messages and audiences, but COVID

and BLM expedited our expansion plans. We now have an army of more than 20 executives helping us generate high-value internal and external storytelling.”

The result? Exec comms “scope and business impact” are expanded, Duzyj says. “This is the time to allow our executives to fly with the action plans we’ve put in place ... We’ve done the messaging problem solving already, and now the rest is scaling execution.”

Conclusion

I recognize that switching from supporting a handful of c-suite execs with messaging to helping dozens of leaders communicate dynamically changes the very nature of the support you can provide. And it asks a lot more of the leaders, too.

But then, these times demand much more of leaders—and thus, of their exec comms pros, too.

And if your execs are capable of doing profound, urgent, consistent, culture-changing communications—you’ll need to be up for helping them.

Best of luck—and be in touch. I look forward to telling your success stories.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Murray is editor and publisher of *Vital Speeches of the Day*, an 83-year-old collection of the best oral communication in the world. He's also executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association.

David writes and speaks frequently on corporate, political and personal communication issues.

David co-wrote the *New York Times*-bestselling memoir *Tell My Sons* (Random House, 2013) and a memoir *Raised by Mad Men*, about his parents, who worked in the ad business in the 1960s.

He has written feature stories on politics, golf, murder, hairpiece making, boxing, ballet, homelessness, motorcycling, the state supreme court, sailing, dinosaurs, professional poker and other related subjects.

His work has appeared in publications and media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Advertising Age*, *Sailing Magazine*, *Golf Magazine*, *Car Collector Magazine*, *Vibe*, the Huffington Post and Chicago Public Radio.

He lives with his wife and daughter in Chicago.