Strategic Communication Isn't Strategic Because You Call It Strategic

By Jim Shaffer

The "strategic communication" term is loosely tossed about by communication practitioners and headhunters alike. But, what does it mean?

Based on more than a few years in the discipline, I think I have a perspective that might answer the question.

Strategic communication manages the communication process to enable business strategy execution. The communication process includes what leaders say and do, formal channels and all the systems that communicate what is and isn't important. These systems include measurement, rewards, recognition, the environment, resource allocation, structure, work and people processes. When strategic communication does its job well, performance rises. When it doesn't, performance is impeded.

Non-strategic communication manages formal channels to communicate about the business strategy. Think of a town hall meeting or any other formal channel, e.g., podcast, email, newsletter, video, used to explain the business strategy. Leaders present the strategy, respond to questions, then people return to work. When non-strategic communication is successful, people are better informed about the business strategy, but performance isn't necessarily measurably better. Customers and shareholders aren't affected.

Strategic work isn't the opposite of tactical work. A lot of tactical work is required to successfully execute a business strategy. The ends of the continuum are on-strategy and off-strategy.

There are four primary forms of strategic communication work.

1. Clarifying the business strategy

I've been working with a client to help the leadership move from a business strategy consisting of vague words and phrases to one that brings clarity and meaning to what people in the organization need to do for the company to win in its marketplace. This requires helping the leaders reach agreement on what certain words contained in the business strategy mean. "When you say this," I ask them, "it means you will do what specifically? It means you will not do what specifically?" The "what" represents actions people in the organization need to take to enable strategy execution. "How will you know you've achieved the what?" I ask them. Their answers begin to form the measures they'll use to determine success.

Clarifying the business strategy is a critical first step that's often skipped. Typically, leaders hand communication practitioners the strategy and say, "Here, go communicate this." Unless we make sure the strategy is clear among the leaders, we may be inviting confusion caused by mixed messages emanating from different members of the leadership team. Confusion diffuses energy and productivity, which can seriously erode an organization's ability to compete.

2. Aligning the “say” and the “do”

Discovering the operational or “do” implications of the business strategy enables us to make sure what is said and done is consistent. If a company’s business strategy advocates going to market as one company offering a portfolio of products or services, for instance, it’s important that goals and measures communicate that leadership interdependencies are important. One large technology company I worked with was attempting to do just this. But, its goals were weighted more heavily to the business units than to the enterprise. This seriously impeded the CEO’s ability to execute his go-to-market strategy.

Teresa Paulsen, vice-president of corporate communication at ConAgra Foods, has begun to transition the Omaha, Nebraska company communication department to one focused on strategic issues.

Bob Kula, ConAgra’s senior director of corporate communication, launched an initiative to align the “say” and the “do” and to find and eliminate communication breakdowns that were causing too many accidents in one of the company’s manufacturing plants. In just five months, accidents dropped 35%. Because theplant was focusing intently on people and their safety, turnover declined 27%.

Kula’s success precipitated a call from the company’s supply chain management people who asked Kula to help attack damage in their warehouses. Kula began by helping one large operation clarify its strategy and goals, then helped the operation’s leadership align people around the goals. This work reduced damage by 61%, improved inventory adjustments by 63% and productivity by 7%. Turnover is also now on track to drop by 24% by the end of the company’s fiscal year.

3. Finding and eliminating communication breakdowns

Organizations are replete with communication breakdowns such as inaccurate, slow-moving or non-existent information and mixed messages. Breakdowns cause people and their businesses to under perform. Eliminating the root cause of breakdowns improves performance. When the investment in removing breakdowns is less than the gain that is created, there’s a positive return on investment. If the communication department creates this return, it is serving as a profit center rather than as a cost center.

Because organizations are fickle by design, some functions, processes or business units influence overall performance more than others. So it usually makes sense to focus communication investments with laser-like precision where they will pay off the most. If $1 will increase people engagement and operating returns by $1,000 in Department A but by only $100 in Department B, it makes more sense to start with Department A.

4. Building communication capability

Some companies use superior communication management as a strategic capability. They believe their ability to move knowledge and information accurately at twitch speed represents a marketplace differentiator. This isn't for everyone because different organizations use different capabilities to achieve success. Switching from "doing communication" to building the organization's ability to manage communication can generate huge strategic value.

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