Strategic integrated communication

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Why is communication so important?

During the previous decades a clear tendency has emerged: organizations and organizational work consist increasingly of communication. For many employees in an organization, work has become communication. Especially for leaders and managers this is their reality. Between 60 and 80% of a manager's activities consist of communication in various forms. Therefore, it is a puzzle that in many organizations communication is not seen as a major topic. Neither is communication seen as one of the organizations most crucial assets. Then, what are the important functions and roles that communication plays, or should play, in a modern organization such as Thule?

Four of them are presented here.

Role no. 1: Communication helps create relations and a good (or bad) image for the company
All organizations have more or less important stakeholders with whom it needs good relationships. Outside, we will find groups such as owners, investors, politicians, media people, neighbours to plants and buildings, potential applicants and the like.

If the company is to survive in its environment, building and maintaining good relationships with such groups are, to say the least, necessary. It is for example, important that the shareholders feel well treated by the company. If we create bad relations with the media, their treatment of us can be devastating for our image among investors. Protesting rallies by neighbours of our plants may perhaps force us to pull out from the site. And so on.

Inside, we have employees of all standings, each one an ambassador of the company when they talk to friends, neighbours etc. If your people do not promote you business and your product who will? And if employees cannot explain and if necessary defend their company when talking to friends and neighbours, then how can they do so when talking to clients?

It is not sheer coincidence that one of the major management activities of today in a majority of large companies has got the umbrella label of *branding.* Branding can be regarded as an effort of the organization to deeply look into questions such as "How do we want our customers and other stakeholders to look at us?" "What do we promise our customers, and in the end do we live up to that promise?" and "Do we really live out our brand, that is, do we act throughout the company accordingly to the values that we believe are guiding

us?" To be a properly branded company, many if not most, communication efforts need to be initiated and co-ordinated.

Role no. 2: Communication helps the organization move forward and to create a "drive"

All modern organizations create plans and strategies of different kinds to determine in which direction the company is moving and what will be expected from people in the organization to reach the goals. In some organizations those at the "shop floor" get to know very little about all this. Consequently, they have few or no hunches about what their role is in the organization as a whole. Other organizations are, on the other hand, zealous about using visions, goals and objectives as well as reporting how these goals are met by the organization and to what degree different units and departments have contributed. In the latter case, the employees know their role, they may find themselves motivated by the vision and are eager to work along the proposed strategy. Communication has there, played its role to drive the people in the company forward. Communication has, once more, created value for the organization.

Excellent leaders see their part in the communication system to give feedback, telling their subordinates that their efforts are appreciated and giving constructive negative feedback to those who need it, giving them a chance to improve their performance.

Those responsible for communication have an important task in helping management to motivate and make people look forward. They can see to that the main strategies and goals are communicated, prioritised among, broken down and translated to different levels and groups in a relevant way. It is thus also a tool, which increases effectiveness. Misunderstandings are minimized, inefficient meetingtime is minimized, the time and innovation would otherwise have taken making it through "The grapevine" is minimized etc.

Role no. 3: Communication helps interpreting and summarising information in a chaotic world

One of the most critical aspects of modern society and modern organizations is the increase of information that makers it very difficult for people outside and inside organizations to make sense of and to understand what is really happening. We are all victims of an exponential growth of information, and we try our best to make a meaning out of what we experience, hear and see. Still, getting an overview and a coherent view of what happens at our workplace and in our company is getting increasingly problematic.

Many modern companies have come to regard this as an obstacle for the company to move forward. They have, hence, oriented their communication to help their leaders and employees understand what is happening by summarising and interpreting, by offering easily understandable key figures and presenting the ongoing story of the company in an inspiring way.

Communication people of the organization have here a great opportunity to show how they contribute to the bottom line. If our leaders and employees

really understand their environment, inside and outside our company through clear and well told communication, lots of misunderstanding and wrong actions can be omitted and energy can be directed toward relevant goals.

Role no. 4: Communication helps make sure that information and knowledge is created and distributed
Modern organizations thrive on information and knowledge. For many of them, knowledge has become *the* most valuable asset in the competition with other companies of the field. Communication here plays the role of encouraging the creation of new ideas and the distribution of "best practice" solutions. The communication channels are used to promote the importance of innovations and creative ways of improving the way people work. In a market where innovative products constitute the difference between companies that will stay in the market and those that are forced to leave, this role of the organizational communication becomes utterly critical.

Electronic channels such as the intra-net have become important vehicles in the struggle to create knowledge-based organizations.

Strategic communication

Strategy is usually defined in terms of a plan for what is needed in order to reach a goal. The strategy of a company functions as a compass, a road description and a map for the joint voyage into the future. As noted above, a properly communicated company strategy may function as motivating but is also something that is reassuring and making the people of the company feel more secure about the future.

To work strategically with communication should mean at least two things: First, it should mean that the communication people work to support the goals, for example the business goals of the organization.

Second, it suggests a way of working in a systematic and analysed way to achieve the results defined in a set of communication goals.

Communication that supports the company's goals
Look at the figure below and note the directions of arrows. There is one flow going from *activity goals* to *communication goals* with a tiny arrow leading further to *company's goals.* This flow represents a non-professional although not uncommon way of doing corporate communication. The company, in this case, takes *action* as their point of departure. "We need to send out a brochure" or "Everyone else creates an intranet, let us do it as well" and "We have not appeared in the media for long, let us call the journalists" are all cases in point. One feels the need to do something communicational and does it without a proper analysis to make sure that it will have effects and that it will support business.

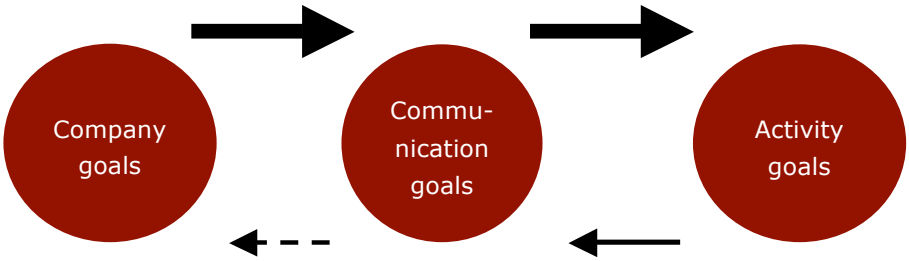

Figure: Strategy Flow

The strategically acting company follows the opposite flow of thinking. It starts with looking at the goals of the company as defined in plans, visions, strategies and the business idea. The people responsible for communication then ask themselves: in order to reach these goals, what kind of communication goals do we have to reach? They then formulate these goals and decide upon what measures in terms of activities the have to take. The communication goals are typically phrased in this way:

- Before January 1st 80% of our employees will know our main values. *This is a knowledge type of goal.*

- Within a year at least 70% of our main investors will express that our stock represents a good investment. *This is an attitudinal type of goal.*

- Our newly appointed managers should after a period of four months' work express a willingness to prioritise communication in their leadership. *This is a motivational goal, expressing an intention.*

- After this seminar that we arrange for journalists, at least 80% of all mentions of us in the local media should be positive or at least neutral. *This is a behavioural goal.*

Goals should, hence, state a point in time where the goal must be attained, and a measure of how many or how large a population should think or behave in the way intended.

The central question asked by a strategic communicator is then: in what way can communication help the company reach its goals?

<u>To work systematically towards a goal</u>
A central characteristic of professional corporate communications is that of working systematically. Traditionally, too much of communication activity has been ad hoc and reactive. Most of the time strategic communication includes a

step-by-step thinking. One of the most well known models for this is the *strategic wheel of communication, as* shown below.

Figure: The Strategic wheel of communication

<u>The starting point of this model is *analysis*</u>
In the analysis we as questions such as:

- What kind of a problem or task is it that we are going to solve? Is it really best solved with communication, or would other types of solutions give a better result?

- Which target groups and stakeholders are involved and what is the probability that we will reach a win-win solution for all parties, or will we be left with some dissatisfied groups which can cause trouble in the future?

- Are the goals we have defined in line with those of the company and are they realistic?

The analysis, how small it may be, is often a worth-the-while activity. It may reveal that the planned communication efforts are not realistic; they may be too expensive, too time consuming and/or yielding too small an effect.

<u>The next phase of the model is *strategy*</u>
The strategy is founded on the analysis. We are now faced with making a series of choices such as:

- What channels will we use to solve our task?

- If we make more than one activity, in what order will they appear?

- Is the problem best solved by one-way or two-way communication?

- Will we try to reach our target groups directly or with the help of intermediaries who will further our messages?

- Is your timing well? There are better or worse points in time to deliver a message.

When formulating the strategy we also ask questions like these:

- Is this really the most effective way to reach the goal?

- Is it cost-effective?

- Will it produce results within short enough time?

A practical suggestion: when you define your strategy, it is often helpful to use a story-board, where you place post-it stickies to visualize the order in which different activities appear. As a board you may use a common whiteboard or the like.

The strategy phase is followed by *activity*
As we noted above, just reactive and ad-hoc activities are often with little effect. But if you have used the model so far, you'll be well prepared to launch your activities. Some do's and don'ts may be useful:

- Be sure that those who are supposed to help you really are prepared and trained for the task. If you want managers throughout the company to further your message, are they willing and do they have the time to do so?

- If you have time, try to pre-test your material on persons in the target group?

- Don't assume that everyone will accept your message the first time it is delivered. You may have to repeat it several times.

The last phase in the model is the *follow-up/evaluation phase*
Here, all practitioners of communication are sinners. We find all kinds of pretexts not to make an evaluation. A common reason for not evaluating is what sometimes is labelled *the fear of being measured.* If we do not get to know whether our campaign or other effort has failed, we can calmly proceed to our next task, assuming that all has gone well.

There is a bundle of evaluation devices for evaluating communication:

- You can use a *survey questionnaire* distributed by post, e-mail or delivered at the employees' desks.

- A popular form for finding out about reactions on communication is the *focus group*, where a group of 6-9 persons from the target group can

express their feelings about message content and format, and about how they have been affected with the help of a focus group facilitator.

- You can also conduct an in-depth interview evaluation, where people of the target group on by one can give their opinions on communication.

- You and your group may also find it useful to make a *debriefing* session, where you discuss the possible positive and negative outcomes of your communication project after it has been finished.

The main idea of an evaluation is to *learn* from the project, not to find people to criticize or to find scapegoats. What you learn in a follow-up can be used in your next project as part of its analysis.

Remember that the evaluation should be based on the goals you have formulated in your analysis. If you, for example, evaluate your in-house magazine or your Intranet, your main focus should always be on the question of whether it fulfils its goals or not.

The ideal evaluation is one that is conducted by someone outside your group, someone who has no stakes in the project.

Integrated communication

When we suggest corporate communication to be *integrated,* we mean that the external messages are in accordance with the internal messages for employees. For example, if Thule is launching a marketing campaign for a new product, this campaign could be strengthened by, for example the following:

- People inside the company will get to know about the campaign through internal communication channels in order to make them prepared to answer questions from customers, the media and their neighbours.

- The local media of the area where the product is produced can get information. For them, it may be interesting news.

- The new product will be shown at a fair just in time for its presentation in ads.

As a rule, integration of communication projects will yield a s*ynergetic effects.* The different channels will support each other, the total effect will be greater, and misunderstandings can be avoided. Therefore, it is often of great value for communication projects to integrate communication people from different departments, such as Marketing, Internal communication/Human Resources, Public Relations for customers and the world at large.

The practical idea of working with strategy by using a storyboard is extremely useful in integrated communications. It will make the combination of different kinds of efforts fairly easy.