

Communications Issues

Issue 32



A Community Service of Harley House Consultants Inc.

Building the Strategic Value of Your Communications Shop

Introduction

Becoming a leading edge strategic communications organization – it sounds like a simple enough idea.

But it's apparently not so simple to accomplish.

Recent interviews with communications leaders, and ongoing consulting and training work with the federal communications community have confirmed for us just how difficult a task it can be. Harley House President Dale Harley and I have connected with a lot of departments over recent months. There is no lack of desire or effort. But positive results still elude many communications branches.

How do you get to that elusive status? How do you build a brand status anchored in strategic leadership, innovative services and creative, modern communications solutions? Here are a few ideas.

Go There Together

When I taught class-room style strategic communications classes at the Canada School of Public Service I was energized watching staffers hone their strategic communications skills and get excited about it. But I was increasingly frustrated by the knowledge that when they went back to their workplaces, they weren't going to get to apply them.

They returned to a work environment that had not been through the same reflective process they had been through. No one else was all of the sudden ready and willing to change. Their training might have given them some longer-term personal skills and ideas, but it also set them up for frustration and cynicism when there was no receptiveness to change among their co-workers and bosses.

That reality is what prompted Harley House to get out of the classroom training business. We now do customized group training within single departments accompanied by team brainstorming on how to apply the learning from the course. That is getting results and it is based on the simple principle that if you want organizational change you have to get there together.

If you want to really change your performance in the area of strategic thinking, you have to do it as a team, not as individuals. Shared definitions of challenges, agreement on the value of change, and specific ideas that can be implemented to get the ball rolling are needed to create real movement towards success. Anything else is a nice token gesture, but it won't contribute to a new and higher "strategic" status for your organization.

Have You Checked Your Relationships Lately?

Lots of elements contribute to group performance – hiring practices, skills development, corporate culture, governance and processes – but one pivotal component of success that is too often overlooked is the effectiveness of your relationships.

Within your organization, the quality of your relationships; manager to manager, manager to employee and employee to employee, can silently carry or destroy your efforts to enhance your strategic value to your clients and partners. Territorialism, lack of respect, absence of sharing mechanisms and cultural baggage can prevent changes and innovations from being identified or guarantee failure in change implementation exercises.

Making Communicators Better Managers—Making Managers Better Communicators

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2. Building the Strategic Value of Your Communications Shop

Similarly, lack of attention and skill in building relationships outside of your branch will impede progress. Remember, it's not you who decides whether your contribution has strategic value; it's those you support and work with.

As one Communications head put it, "Open and transparent is less about sharing and more about listening."

Harley House Consultants believes there is work to be done in most communications shops to make relationships an asset.

To support that commitment we will soon be rolling out a questionnaire to heads of communications to create a data base of challenges relating to relationships and other key contributors to success in the government communications business. Dale Harley has had great success with a similar data base for private sector clients. It's our hope that creating and allowing free access to this kind of comparative data for government communications leaders will help the community make decisions on going forward strategies to modernize and improve services and approaches.

It pays to pay attention to your relationships. Through them you can tap into energy and ideas. Without them, progressive change and real strategic contributions are not going to happen.

A Culture of Evaluation

When is an innovation not an innovation? When it doesn't work, that's when.

As many departments scramble to jump on the digital bandwagon they are making the mistake of using new tools and approaches simply because they are there or because other departments are doing it.

Tweets that nobody reads, chats that nobody wants to hear, and web content that audiences aren't interested in aren't helping you create strategic value. They are wasting your time.

Building a culture of evaluation does not mean creating loads of data on visits and retweets for your technical guy to marvel at and enjoy. It means a top-down commitment to always learning and doing better. It means sharing and talking about results and outcomes in terms of really smart communications goals and objectives. It means pushing evaluation and analysis into the forefront of all conversations you have and not being defensive about identifying room for improvement.

In Conclusion

Through your personal leadership you can build a culture of constant improvement through evaluation. And once you get there, not only is heightened strategic value possible, it is almost inevitable. Let's keep the conversation going. At Harley House we are happy to hear your ideas and comments.

(Phil Hurcomb is a former ADM-level communications leader in the federal public service. He is a Senior Associate with Harley House Consultants Inc.)

"At Harley House Consultants Inc. we believe that effective communications involves meaningful, constructive and thoughtful engagement with internal and external stakeholders. You have to be strategically positioned to provide timely, complete, honest, open and sincere information about the policies, programs and services of the Government of Canada."

For more information about how to improve the effectiveness of your consultation and communications strategies,

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