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Getting a Grip on the New Internal Communications Reality

By Phil Hurcomb

Whether you currently have a strategic internal communications plan or not, it's time to start building one.

That has to be Harley House's biggest take away from a series of interviews with federal communications leaders over the summer about the true communications impacts of the pandemic. The pandemic forced us to look at doing things in new ways and doing new things.

What Communications Leaders Say

Over the summer I interviewed several leaders in the federal communications community about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their work. There was near unanimous agreement on two key point; Covid has impacted communications work in every corner of government, and the greatest impact of all (with the probable exception of the lead health and financial departments) has not been on the performance of the external communications function, but rather on how you manage and lead communications within your departments and within the communications shops you run.

That said, each story from the communications community is different. Departments that already had remote offices and regional operations generally found the transition to the stay-at-home workplace a little easier to manage than others. Similarly, groups that had put a high priority on departmental internal connectivity and healthy interaction within the communications group itself, were nimbler at adjusting to the ongoing closure of offices than the rest.

The leadership qualities and commitment of deputy heads has been a decisive factor in the success of internal communications in this up-side-down pandemic world. Most DM's these days are screened for their understanding of internal culture, the value of inclusiveness and employee engagement. But organizations with leaders who stepped easily and quickly into strong internal communications roles and spent energy on connectivity adjusted more easily to the crisis at hand.

Many comms leaders acknowledged an increased profile and respect for the communications function as senior management tuned into the essential nature of clear, effective, and constant communications during a crisis that physically split their organizations apart.

Pride in the “get it done” attitude of communications personnel and the energy and imagination demonstrated, while coming up with new ways to inform and engage, were identified by many communications leaders as hallmarks of the Covid response. But several leaders pointed to the added, grinding workload that the pandemic has brought to a government community that was already overworked and underfunded. Issues surrounding work/life balance and the separation of work and home life have been exacerbated by the work-from-home pandemic response. Losing those casual communal breaks and elevator rides has also impacted the quality of work and the personal satisfaction of comms personnel.

Most communications staff, like other public servants, also acknowledge real advantages to working from home. Reduced and eliminated work travel time, relaxed dress codes, and the ability to better blend personal and work imperatives during the day are all steps forward that no employee group wants to lose. All informal and formal surveys of federal staff indicate that nobody wants to go back to the old status quo of five days a week in the old office environment.

Leaps forward in the use of new visual communications technologies for both internal and external communications happened everywhere. But on the home front, how do you make repeat electronic meetings engaging and vibrant experiences and how do you use new techniques to replicate the dynamism of in-person interaction? Internal communications questions in need of answers continue to pile up while external communications requirements never seem to take a holiday.

Build Your Internal Communications Strategy for the Future

Compounding the challenges facing government from the pandemic is the emerging reality that Covid and its many variants are not “just going to go away” in the coming months. We know that workplaces and workforces have been changed permanently. We know that technology’s new place in organizational communication must be thought through, planned, and supported. It must evolve and mature as well. And now more than ever, thanks to the pandemic, government managers know that successful organizations take on employee communications as a priority right from the supervisor level to the top corner office.

The precise shape of the office of the future is still unknown, but uncertainty is no reason to ignore the need for planning and leadership now.

Three Things to Get Started on Now

Harley House Consultants believes you can and should be taking steps now to help your organization build a future anchored in a strong, new commitment to internal communications and employee engagement:

1. Ask Your Employees What They Want, Not Just How They Want to Receive It

Too many government organizations consider internal communications to be all about giving employees what management wants them to know and believe. Harley House says there are three different objectives for a successful internal communications program, not one:

- Giving employees the corporate perspective, you want them to have,
- Providing information, platforms and vehicles that help them achieve specific work goals, and
- Meeting their individual needs and desire to connect with others on a personal level and enjoy their work.

With the easy, cost-free access you have to 100% of your department or agency’s employees, there is absolutely no reason not to use imaginative quantitative and qualitative research tools to get honest and frank views on each of these functions of internal communications. The workplace environment has been turned on its head by the pandemic and the tech revolution. Build your new approach to internal communications from the bottom up with a vibrant research project that gets to the bottom of this new reality.

2. Build a New and Better Relationship with IM/IT

Internal communications of the future will involve an evolving, new blend of electronics-led communications options, and that will require a new partnership between technologists and content creators if it is going to work.

Historically, relations between IM/IT shops and comms have been distant and sometimes adversarial in some government organizations. Building a partnership dialogue on platforms, capacity, procedures, and tools to be investigated and adopted for intra-department communications has never been so essential. Having gone through more than 18 months of the pandemic, this should now be evident to your department or agency's senior leaders, so the time to forge a new relationship that respects your expertise in content and the psychology of workplace communications is now.

Be a leader in building a technology presence in your department that helps create better work results and more engaged employees. Principles and practices for the development and implementation of interactive communications tools must be part of your departmental internal communications strategy of the future.

3. Show Leadership in Internal Communications Throughout Your Organization

Effective internal communications can be supported and supplemented by newsletters, web sites, chat rooms, lobby screens and the like, but all employee surveys show conclusively that quality linkages between managers, supervisors and staff will make or break the quality of the work experience in any organization.

Seize on high-profile examples from the pandemic of how constant communications and updates from all levels of management enabled your organization to success. Use the current heightened respect for the power of internal communications to enshrine a commitment to effective employee engagement across your organization through your new internal strategic communications plan.

Regular discussions at the senior management table, using performance evaluation tools, mandatory communication training for managers, and awards and recognition for effective internal communications are only some of the options we recommend you consider as you respond to the current internal communications planning opportunity.

Let's keep the dialogue going on post-Covid comms in the federal government context.

(Phil Hurcomb is a Senior Associate with Harley House Consultants Inc., and a former federal government ADM-level leader)

At Harley House we assist our clients improve their effectiveness. Our solution is to transfer knowledge and skills so that organizations like yours can more effectively manage their own communications, engagement, and change efforts. We help organizations build understanding and capacity. We don't swoop in, drop a thick presentation deck on your desk and leave. We arm you with customized tools, training, coaching, processes, and procedures.

For more information about how to improve the effectiveness of your change, engagement and communications management efforts visit: www.harleyhouse.com, or contact:

Dale Harley:
dale@harleyhouse.com
613-882-5684

Phil Hurcomb:
phil@harleyhouse.com
613-741-4376

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