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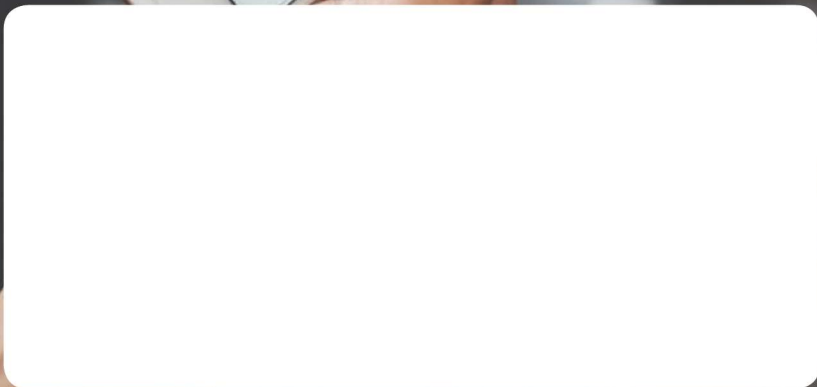
Communications and Social Media

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5 Steps to Conduct an Effective Social Media Recruitment Campaign

How to Communicate Change Effectively in the Public Sector

By Gregg Brown

Public policy can change with an election, an amended budget or the stroke of an elected official's pen. In other words, quickly and often.

This saddles government agency leaders with the difficult task of clearly communicating strategies for responding to and implementing changes with employees who have a wide range of responsibilities and work settings. Certainly. at the state level, when tens of thousands of employees are affected, there is no single correct way to engage with them all.

Fortunately, there are several approaches you can take to share essential and actionable information while keeping employees positive, motivated and onboard during a change process.

Speak to Your People, Not at Them

Process, content and delivery combine to determine the effectiveness of any effort to communicate. To help ensure that your people understand your message, avoid using buzzwords and industry jargon. Opt instead for being honest, specific and relatable.

Most importantly, share only relevant information. If you bog your audience down with a lot of unnecessary content, the people who need to know what you are telling them will miss the main points or tune out entirely.

Whether you deliver your message verbally, in writing or both, strive to be concise and unambiguous. Above all, remember that conducting a meeting is not the same as communicating.

Validate Your Instincts With Data

No matter how strongly you sense that your staff is not in tune with a change, you cannot devise a proper response for improving the situation until you confirm what the problem is.

The best way to gather the data you need is to go around and talk to your people. Make notes on the feedback you hear, then sit down and convert your discussions into quantitative data by identifying and counting keywords.

For example, if 7 out of 10 people told you, "I don't understand why there will be a change," you can easily determine that 70 percent of the people you spoke to do not understand the need for changing. You can then work on explaining why the change is being implemented.

Establish a Feedback Loop

High-performing organizations provide channels for bottom-up communications. That is, they factor in employees' input when making decisions.

Asking for feedback from change targets—that is, the internal and external stakeholders who will be most affected—while rolling out a change initiative allows you to quickly respond to issues. Check with other government staff to get input, as well. Above all, make sure that the appropriate part of the organization owns the feedback. That might not be the human resources department.

Do Not Paper Over Problems With Positivity

Simply putting a positive spin on change will not overcome staff members' skepticism. Saying something like, "Everything will be better in the long run," does not address or resolve concerns. Even if the statement is true, making this all you say accomplishes little beyond demonstrating that you disagree with the negativity. Conveying such a message could shut down communication with your team altogether.

Projecting false positivity hampers change management. When your staff recognizes they are being misled, acrimony will fester.

Actually embracing negativity, however, lets you move beyond it. Holding a timed discussion with your team about what they perceive as the negative aspects of the change and what actions can be taken to eliminate or minimize problems changes the focus from obstacles to solutions.

Create Behavioral Change With Technology

No matter what kind of change your organization is planning, be it process, technical, or organizational, employees will need to make some sort of behavioral change. And changing people's behaviors can be difficult, especially if they have been doing things the same way for years.

You can use technology to adjust your team's behavior to align with the broader change. For instance, you can encourage them to question their own actions every time they log on to their computers. Try using a series of screensavers that display short scenarios and questions, such as

- Is the action described legal?
- Does the practice described follow organizational policy?
- Is what the person did moral or ethical?
- How would my manager feel if she knew I did what the person in the scenario did?

These mini exercises will engage your staff, get them thinking and create interest in a policy or ethical question. To further feed their interest, link the content of the login screen to pages on your intranet that present more information.

You can also use a login screen to create a what-if scenario to increase knowledge of a new policy or compliance procedure. For example, ask employees to consider what could happen if the organization had no policy regarding internet use.

Always remember to keep the scenarios and questions short and to the point. Chances are, your people will be logging in first thing in the morning. Making things simple will ensure you are not be holding them back from starting their day—or enjoying their morning coffee.

There Is No Such Word as 'Should'

When communicating change, do not tell employees what they should have done. Saying "should" assigns blame, which, in turn, triggers guilt, shame and a decrease in morale.

Instead, try saying, "Here's what you could do next time." Using supportive language will go a long way toward keeping staff motivated.

Similarly, give positive, clear instructions along the lines of "If this happens, do this." Be as precise as possible so employees understand what you expect them to do.

Use Effective Communication Strategies

Not all of us are born communicators. However, you do not need to have hosted a handful of TED Talks or written a shelf of books to get your message across.

As someone who appears on stage frequently, I find telling stories to be a great way to communicate change. Just be sure to ground every story in facts, details and data.

Most importantly, think about what you want your audience to take away from your communication, whether that is that they should support a change or that they should change their mindset. Focusing on what you want your audience to learn helps you clarify your message.

Promote a Shift in Mindset

Implementing a change involves more than shifting behavior or learning a new skill. It requires changing a mindset. This is even more true when it comes to sustaining a change.

To shift the mindset, gather stories, data, evidence, client results and lessons learned to illustrate positive outcomes from making the change in how work gets done, how employees work with each other, understanding the organization's overall business model or whatever the new thing is.

Communicating this verbally and in written form will help your people see the mindset shift you are asking for.

Prepare People to Be Unprepared

Your people desire stability. To make a change, then, you must build their capacity for dealing with uncertainty.

Of course, everyone wants assurances that everything will go smoothly, but sometimes the only thing to do is admit that no one can be sure how things will go. Since no one can always have a solution to every possible complication, effectively communicating change requires telling team members that they will need to work with you to solve problems as they arise.

You can offset concerns about this learning-on-the-fly approach by letting employees know that you will be there with them to navigate the change process. If you can prepare them to be unprepared, they will be ready for anything.

Gregg Brown, the author of Ready… Set … Change Again!, *is an expert in the fields of leadership, resilience and change who was part of the team that opened the first wave of Starbucks stores in Canada. He has a particular focus on effecting behavioral change among prisoners in federal penitentiaries. You can contact him through* www.greggbrown.ca. —N