# Communication: The Foundation for Successful HR Program Implementation

## Six key goals of a strategic communication plan

*Implementing a new HR program is a challenge steeped in complex design decisions and delicate considerations. Yet without rigorous, well-planned implementation, even the best change initiatives can fail.*

*A strong communications program ensures organizations gain the necessary internal support to integrate significant change and ultimately, that quality HR programs are impactful.*

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## Introduction

When a new program fails to take hold in an organization, it is tempting to fault the program design. "Too complex." "Not right for our culture." "Not compatible with other programs." But often, the true fault lies not in how the program is designed, but how it is communicated and implemented. A wise executive once said, "I'd rather develop an average program that is well-implemented than an outstanding program that is poorly implemented." For a new program in human resources—from compensation to benefits to performance management—devoting the effort needed for effective implementation is key to success.

How many times have you seen this scenario played out in your organization?

*The HR department needs to rouse a work force demotivated by the disruptive forces of internal and external change. It marches in a team of skilled consultants. They help design an elegant program that establishes a new career and competency ladder for all professional positions, as well as a revamped reward and recognition system that introduces incentives for everyone in the organization.*

*With great fanfare, HR rolls out the new program in large-group meetings throughout the company. Yet two years later, the program has never really caught on; the malaise that the program was designed to relieve still permeates the organization. Assuming they had simply developed the wrong program, leaders take stock and seek to find "a better design" or a "different approach." Six months later, they design and launch another "program du jour"—with the same lackluster results.*

Is program design the issue that derails these efforts? Sometimes. But more often, the culprit is ineffective implementation. And the foundation of successful implementation is communication—not only in its traditional form (presentations, newsletters, brochures, etc.), but also in a deeper form, one that engenders support throughout the organization.

Three things make this deeper form of communication successful. First, it is front-loaded. It includes communication and implementation planning in the initial needs assessment and preliminary design process. Second, it is back-loaded. It keeps postlaunch communications frequent and focused. And finally, it almost always requires not just "buy-in" but active support from line management to transmit key messages down the line.

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Significant programs cannot be pasted onto an organization. They must be carefully woven into the cultural fabric. In the example above, the organization no doubt failed to design a campaign that could win over the hearts and minds of managers and employees alike.

## Implementing Change: An Internal Sales Job

Orchestrating internal change is, at its core, a selling proposition. And selling relies on skillful, well-planned communication. Who could imagine a food products organization creating a new snack food without also developing a marketing and implementation plan? Or without conducting external research to determine what kind of advertising and packaging would have the greatest impact?

Yet programs involving internal change are rarely approached with such rigor—and almost never at the start of their development. By the time communications professionals are brought in, their contribution is often "too little, too late."

Case in point: the US division of a multinational equipment manufacturer. When its biannual employee survey revealed concerns about reward and recognition, the organization devoted significant internal and external resources to uncovering the real issues and creating a sound solution. It failed, however, to focus with the same intensity on communications. As senior executives, the compensation department, and outside consultants spent countless hours coming up with the right "redesign," the work force remained oblivious to their efforts—the concerns voiced in the survey seemingly unaddressed and virtually unmentioned.

By the time the new program was ready—more than a year after the survey—it was almost impossible to sell. Employee attitudes had hardened. Moreover, the eventual communications around the launch focused too much on the mechanics of the plan and too little on how the plan was developed and why, how it addressed employee concerns, or even how it related to the bigger picture of the company's future goals.

Like a selling proposition, orchestrating internal change relies on skillful, well-planned communication.

# Why New Programs Fail

When an organization does not develop its communications from a sound strategic and tactical platform, some common problems arise:

■ **Communications are not aligned with the realities of the business.** Often, messages may sugarcoat or not truly address the reasons for the program change. Odds are, employees will accept change if they believe management is being honest.

■ **Communication is too narrow.** When the focus is limited to program design and mechanics, for instance, the organization loses an opportunity to shape employee attitudes.

■ **Communication is too sudden.** When leaders fail to prepare the work force to receive their messages, their abruptness interferes with message reception.

■ **Communication is not adapted for different levels in the organization.** Information must cascade appropriately. For instance, problems usually occur when managers and their direct reports get the same information at the same time. Managers feel "out of the loop" from the start and may very well not buy into the intent of the program if their questions and concerns are not addressed. This alienation is exacerbated when they cannot answer employee questions.

When managers feel "out of the loop" from the start, they may not buy into the program.

### Research: Communication Is a Challenge for Most

According to a recent study by Hay Group, WorldatWork, and Loyola University (Chicago), most organizations struggle with effective communications on pay. Some 1,200 compensation professionals from a broad cross-section of organizations reported that about two-thirds of respondents believe their pay-related communications are marginally effective or ineffective. This is key, since companies perceived as being most effective at communication also indicated that they were better at motivating employees and having more effective reward programs. Also, about half of survey respondents reported that improving the communication of program objectives is one of the key focus areas of compensation professionals. ■

Figure 1: **To what extent do managerial and professional employees understand the company's compensation philosophy?**

33%
Most
Understand

67%
Do Not
Understand
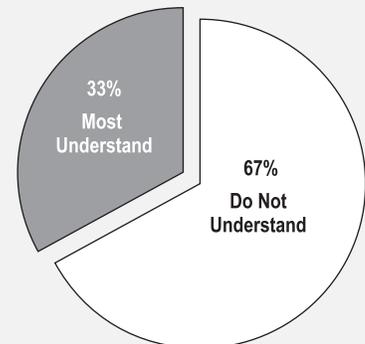
*Source: Hay Group, WorldatWork, Loyola University of Chicago*

- **Expectations are not managed.** For example, a perfectly sound new performance appraisal system may meet resistance not because of its lack of merit, but because employees have been led to expect a more radical break from the current system. Similarly, allowing the grapevine to spread overly optimistic projections of the extent of planned compensation change will detract from the true message, once it is delivered.

- **Messages do not have enough intentional redundancy and overlap.** "Message sent" does not equal "message received." Even outstanding communicators sometimes forget that their elegant prose or eye-catching graphic may not penetrate the consciousness of busy and often distracted people.

- **The wrong messengers are used.** Research has shown that employees tend to trust information when it comes from their managers. Using managers as messengers is a key requirement, then, for effective communication.

- **Communications have weak second or third acts.** Sometimes, even when preliminary communications are good, the second act—rollout— falls short. Even large-scale and comprehensive rollouts can miss the mark; employees may need a different approach, such as intimate, small group meetings instead of grandiose speeches and PowerPoint presentations. At the same time, those who do a good job getting through the rollout may not do as well with follow-up. Continual communication in the third act is usually essential to put a new program over the top—and integrate it into the corporate culture, rather than into a loose-leaf binder, gathering dust.

- **Not enough of the right resources are in place.** Sometimes seemingly excellent strategic and tactical plans are followed by substandard execution. Perhaps the internal communications staff is not up to the task or has been diverted by other projects. Or maybe outside contractors don't have the subject-matter expertise to translate the tactical plan into effective "piece-by-piece" communications.

Yet if the communications program is well-designed and well-executed—front-loaded, back-loaded, and avidly supported by management—quality HR programs are destined to be wholeheartedly embraced and seamlessly incorporated by the organization at every level.

Odds are, employees will accept change if they believe management is being honest.

I nvolvement up front is essential not just to set the stage for rollout. It also enables the organization to take a strategic perspective. This strategy should ensure that the communication approach is well-considered, consistent, and effective.

A strategic plan for communication should consider the following goals:

**Trust should rank high on any list of communication objectives.**

1. **Developing a full range of communications objectives.** Most organizations will focus on making sure that employees and managers understand the details of a new program design. Although this is certainly important, communication objectives like this are far too narrow. For instance, leaders should view change—even if it involves some hard realities for employees to accept, such as increases in benefit costs—as an opportunity to inspire trust in management's decision-making processes and leadership ability. Trust should rank high in any list of communications objectives.

2. **Developing key messages that will resonate within the organization.** How many programs have failed to meet expectations because messages around the program were incomplete, conflicting, or poorly conceived or delivered? Messages must be well-considered, concise, consistent, and ubiquitous—present in almost every communication, formal or informal. They should be crafted to help fulfill communications objectives.

3. **Segmenting and understanding the audiences affected by change.** Every organization has multiple audiences requiring tailored approaches. To professional-level key contributors, a new performance management system may mean one thing; to managers who must implement this system, it may mean something entirely different. Communicating to these two groups requires different message tracks, media, and follow-up.

4. **Choosing the right messengers.** Who delivers the messages is very important. In some organizations, the immediate manager is the key person. In others, unless the CEO and other senior leaders are active messengers, many will

discount the importance of the message. In still others, HR representatives may seem the practical choice, yet not be in the best position to influence managers and employees alike. Every culture and every program are different, and messengers should be selected with great care.

5. **Evaluating a range of potential vehicles.** Too often, the universal objective of getting messages out in many forms, all accessible to different audiences, is left on automatic pilot. If no one reads the company newsletter or visits the company intranet, then these are not the right vehicles—or at least not the right primary vehicles—to carry important information. Organizations must assess the trade-offs between pull and push communications and measure the impact of each communication medium.

6. **Assessing the key issue of timing.** Doing all these activities correctly but failing to time the communications effort appropriately may diminish the expected impact. Too much time between messages (with the often-incorrect assumption that people remember the last message) is a common problem. Communicating too soon—and then having to backpedal if changes occur— is another potential problem. At the same time, waiting too long usually means that the grapevine will grow out to strangle any further communications.

## Building the Tactical Plan

Ready, Fire, Aim. For many organizations, that is the sequence of the communications program. The tactical plan is the heart of all communications efforts, yet too often, organizations start with a plan completely uninformed by strategic planning. Or worse yet, they have no real plan, only a series of unconnected *ad hoc* pieces that probably won't do the job.

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**Figure 2: Sample Communications Plan—Incentive and Performance Management Plan**

| Deliverable/ Vehicle | Purpose | Content/ Messages | Messenger | Audiences | Timing | Accountability |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **E-Mail or Other Unit Vehicle** | Personalize Communication within Unit | ■ Reinforce Personal Business Head Support<br>■ Address Local Issues<br>■ Tee Up Upcoming Same Page Article | Individual Business Heads | Individual Unit All-Employee Groups<br>*Note: May issue distinct messages for managers and nonmanagers* | December | Communications Team |
| **Brochure** | In-Depth Intro of PM Program | ■ Offer Overview of Purpose<br>■ Validate Development Process<br>■ Demonstrate Strategic Value<br>■ Briefly Describe Program<br>■ Review Training and Orientation Process<br>■ Provide Rollout Plan<br>■ Communicate that the Process Is a Cycle, Not an Event | Business Heads and/or Core Team | All Employees | January | Hay Group |
| **Newsletter** | Initial Communication to All Employees | ■ Provide Brief Overview<br>■ Manage Expectations<br>■ Distinguish "Eligible" Group/Note Plan for Others | Joint from Business Heads | All Employees | TBD (Concurrent with Manager Training Mid-August Launch) | Communications Team |
| **Video Broadcast** | Provide Endorsement from the Top | ■ Make Stratetic Connection<br>■ Offer Brief Overview of Benefits | Charlie Smith | All Employees | December, March | Hay Group |
| **Special E-Mail** | Update Executives and Managers | ■ Report on Progress of Program and Training-Orientation Process<br>■ Issue Reminder of Upcoming Activity<br>■ Reinforce Management Role | Business Heads and/or Core Team | Executives and Managers | October | Hay Group |
| **Newsletter** | Provide Endorsement from the Top | ■ Make Strategic Connection<br>■ Offer Brief Overview of Benefits<br>■ Define Performance Management | Charlie Smith | All Employees | November | Staff (Hay Group Oversight) |
| **Newsletter** | Provide Endorsement from the Top | ■ Report on Progress of Program and Training-Orientation Process<br>■ Issue Reminder of Upcoming Activity<br>■ Reinforce Management Role | Business Heads and/or Core Team | Executives and Managers | December | Staff (Hay Group Oversight) |

*\* May be combined with description/information about larger talent management initiative.*
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Organizations must assess trade-offs between push and pull communications, measuring the impact of each medium.

If your strategic plan is in order, and you use it in creating the tactical plan, then you will have a communications blueprint to help you develop an effective program.

## Implementing for Impact

Of course, to be effective, the best-laid plans must be well-executed. Materials must scrupulously follow the plan. Accountabilities and resources are critically important here. At the same time, those managing the process must be flexible enough to add or adjust "on the fly" as realities dictate. Remember, the goal is to achieve the communications objectives, not just to check off the boxes next to the communications schedule and declare the mission accomplished.

## About Hay Group

Hay Group is a global organizational and human resources consulting firm that helps its clients—Boards, CEOs, Executives, and HR Managers— on virtually all aspects of their people-related business issues. Founded in 1943, Hay Group has over 2,200 employees working from 77 offices in 76 cities and 43 countries.

Our areas of expertise include:

■ Design and analysis of organizations and jobs;

■ Talent management through assessment, selection, and development;

■ Compensation, benefits, and performance management;

■ Executive remuneration and corporate governance; and

■ Employee and customer attitude research.

Hay Group works with nearly three-quarters of FORTUNE's top-50 Most Admired Companies, as well as many mid-sized and non-profit corporations, public institutions, and governments.