

### **DAVID GROSSMAN:** Connecting the dots from global to local

For a global organization, creating a vision that's meaningful to all employees can be very challenging, says David Grossman of communication consulting firm, dg&a. "The key is finding the right language that works as well as possible in as many places as possible," he says. "This can be a fantastic exercise because it forces us to simplify and be very clear about the meaning behind a vision, a mission or a set of values."

#### **Creating the "common experience" globally**

Recently, a leading quick-service restaurant company needed to define what "superior service" means and looks like in all of its restaurants so customers could have a common experience everywhere around the world. Local cultures, languages and customs across countries – and even across towns – led to many interpretations of superior service. For service to be a common experience, the definition needed to be known and understood by all. In the absence of a common language, the company developed a common list of attributes and behaviors that could be shared with communicators around the world who then could translate for relevance to their country, language and culture.

"Even when a communicator isn't faced with the challenge of communicating something like this globally, they should always seek to simplify," he adds, "as if you were looking to communicate globally."

#### **Bringing the values to life**

Grossman points to the need to get behind words and phrases and really look at meaning. "If these words are to become mission-critical components – an organization's soul or compass that guides it in challenging times – then we need to bring the vision and behaviors to life: what it looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like, even what it tastes like. That's the challenge and the opportunity." These critical components need to be operationalized into behaviors that are specific enough for employees to understand so they can mirror the actions management wants to see.

#### **Involve management right from the start**

So where should a team start? Alignment should be a priority, says Grossman. "It's a truism that alignment must precede communication. We often don't spend enough time ensuring alignment; and this means getting the right people on board and ensuring that management is comfortable articulating what the greater meaning behind, for example, a vision is.

"That should always be one of the outcomes of a session where management comes together to work on a topic like values. The more potentially esoteric a topic – for example, values and behaviors – the more there's a need to engage management and ensure they have skin in the game. That means they need pre-work to bring to a session or homework so they can be personally involved. For example, have an executive operationalize on their own a list of behaviors that represent a value to bring to a management meeting."

Another tip is to have leaders picture the best person they know – his or her "go-to" employee for example. Ask them to list what values and behaviors that employee exhibits that makes him or her best. This gets the executive describing the specific behaviors and actions and how they match up to the values (or if they don't match up to the values ... then it identifies incongruencies).

#### **Establish the meaning before you create the words**

All too often, time can be focused on creating the words themselves. What's more important is getting the right people aligned to the concepts. That means, when asked, these people can all articulate in roughly the same way what these concepts mean and what they look like in action. When we're able to get that alignment around meaning – I call it "going slow to go fast" – it makes the rest of the process much smoother; you can then start to talk about implementation across borders.

Another step is to have clarity around what a vision is, what a mission is and what the behaviors should be. At its simplest:

- **A vision:** where an organization aims to be in the long term; it's about the ideal future state and what the organization wants to be.
- **A mission:** what the organization does today; its true purpose and reason for being.
- **The values:** the "soul" of the organization; it's how people in the organization act or function to achieve the vision and mission.
- **The behaviors:** how people conduct themselves; behaviors should be operationalized into daily actions.

"What's critical is to get these core components together on one page and translated into daily actions. Do we as a management team understand all this? Can we connect the dots up front so other people can? And, importantly, do all of these pieces fit together to make a coherent whole?"

When a leading insurance company introduced a new identity and service offering to remain competitive in the marketplace, it also needed to create awareness of these changes with employees so they could meet the company's business goals. Central to this process, we gathered the management team together to define and agree on the specific behaviors, personality traits and customer experiences that needed to be delivered in order for employees to deliver the new brand promise. After much healthy discussion, the management team in the end became aligned around the traits and behaviors, which then set into motion message development and iterative testing and the communication plan.

When you have an initial list of these components and management alignment, you're ready to do iterative message testing with key audiences to identify and highlight what messages resonate (or don't) and to learn what messages are not clear.

### **Implementing the vision and values across the organization**

The next step is to implement the vision and values across an organization. "This is all about how we help people understand and derive meaning from these concepts. We must ask ourselves, what's the process by which we create dialogue around these topics so people can really understand what they mean? It's not about sending information out across the globe – people are already bombarded with that. It's about how we create opportunities to explain these concepts and create dialogue to challenge, question and disagree, so people start to understand for themselves and have some ownership."

### **Message testing helps you find out what resonates with your audience**

Whether the organization is global or not, Grossman describes launching values as the perfect time to do message testing. "We can put a set of values in front of a group of employees and ask what resonates with them or what they don't get," he says. "They can help us find the right words or concepts."

"Often, communicators think they need to find the right words, but in reality we just need to facilitate a smart process because the people at the front line are most able to help us 'articulate' these core components. Employees might choose different wording for a value than management, but the meaning is what matters."

"We may know the intention that management has, but we can use message testing to enable employees to help us best express what management wants to get across."

A great example is when after a merger, executives at a leading medical center were concerned that employees didn't know about the new mission or how their individual roles contributed to the new organization (in addition to ensuring resources were leveraged across hospitals). Through message testing with employees, we were able to identify what resonated with employees at all levels around the organization's mission, values and specific behaviors, which guided our communication strategy. In the end, nearly 95 percent of the staff understood their

specific role in helping achieve the organization’s mission – which exceeded the goal of 75 percent because we used the words and concepts that were most meaningful to them.

In terms of ongoing communication around values, consistency and integration are key, says Grossman. “The things that are most important to an organization need to be communicated regularly and integrated into all the essential communications. For example, with values – if there are stories on the intranet or in an internal newsletter, when we talk about key initiatives or profile people, do we link back to and reference core components like values? Employees should see the same messages across the different vehicles – from the CEO, from their supervisor, from the newsletter and from the intranet. This consistency is key to building trust and belonging.

“If values give us the rationale to make decisions, then values need to be linked to key decisions, for example, major organizational announcements such as acquisitions. Employees need to see how the acquisition supports the values. It’s about connecting the dots,” Grossman says.

**Local modification**

When it comes to adapting values locally, Grossman suggests that country managers are given responsibility to “operationalize” concepts. “Theoretically, values and behaviors should be the common ground that works, as best as possible, across cultures. In the case of most of our clients, it’s up to individual country managers to supplement what the behaviors look like in that particular culture. This is how we operationalize those values – so what they specifically mean; what they look like; and how they impact everyday actions may all be slightly different. The values are essentially the same, but what they look like is respectful and fits within that specific culture.”

Communicators can give guidance to country managers on how to operationalize those values and ensure they are having an impact. “We use a model (see Figure 3.1, below) to ensure messages are getting through in a meaningful way,” says Grossman.

**Fig 3.1:** *dg&a’s model helps managers “operationalize” values effectively*



The dg&a model consists of four parts:

1. **Accountability.** There needs to be accountability at multiple levels, in this case the country level – what are the communication expectations of the country leader?
2. **Training.** Does the leader have the competence they need to customize and communicate this critical information?
3. **Tools.** Provide toolkits leaders can use in various settings, based on audience, to get the message across.
4. **Evaluation.** Measurement doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming to be effective, and it should link back to accountability.

“A key piece in all of this – that's often overlooked – is reward,” says Grossman. “Reward needs to be tied to accountability, otherwise it can be just a ‘nice to do’ as opposed to doing something great and being rewarded for it. What gets rewarded gets done – often there may be a broad communication metric in place but it's not operationalized in terms of the behaviors that make up the competency. It should be about specific responsibilities such as how often they have staff meetings etc.

“The next step is outcome-focused measurement such as an employee survey that looks at engagement levels. This can then be examined at the level of individual leaders. We're often brought in to work with leaders who need to improve those metrics, but communicators should set leaders up to be highly visible and highly impactful from the outset, instead of waiting for low scores to appear,” he says.

### The role of leaders in global communication

Leaders get promoted for other reasons than being a good communicator, says Grossman, and few will admit to being a poor communicator. “To succeed today, communication is the critical competency,” he says, “and very few leaders will say, for example: ‘I'm not a good communicator, I'm not sure what to do with this Q&A, I'm not sure how to use this PowerPoint presentation or how to field these questions.’ The training and coaching element is vital but one that we as communicators often pay lip service to.”

This is particularly important, says Grossman, in a global organization where there might not be a communicator on the ground and the leader takes on more communication responsibility. “In this case, the leader needs support. Communication is a learned skill and the leader should have great counsel as they do in other critical areas such as finance and IT. These areas are critical enablers to the organization, just like communication.”

So how can a communicator best provide support to a country leader? “There needs to be a high-level plan in place as to how communication can best support the achievement of that leader's business goals,” says Grossman. “An assessment of the leader from a communication standpoint needs to happen as well as an assessment of how communication is flowing through the organization today.”

### Multiple levels of messaging

In a complex organization where an employee might be part of a team that's also part of a division, a country and a region, how many levels can you realistically expect people to connect with? “The most important information for employees is about their job, their performance and their relationship with their manager,” says Grossman. “In other words, they're thinking about themselves. But, once they're taken care of, they're then much more open to and able to receive messages about the larger organization – the country, their team, where the organization is going etc. But this can only happen when their needs are taken care of. Only then are they aware of and can begin to process wider company information that we want them to get to.

“From a management standpoint that makes sense,” adds Grossman. “If people don't know what their job is or how they fit in but they do know where the company's going, it's not as beneficial to the company as if they really understood their role. This shows just how important it is to engage supervisors. Communicators can facilitate, but they can't provide the direct information on what an employee's job is or how they're

performing – that’s the supervisor’s role. Communicators can help supervisors understand their role and what the communication needs of employees are.”

When this “foundation” information on an employee’s role and their performance is in place, you can then build on that with wider messages. “So often organizations implement campaigns around visions and values and it goes right over everyone’s heads and they wonder why. It’s because there was some change going on and people were worried about information that was much closer and more pertinent to them,” Grossman says.

### **Global versus local messages**

When it comes to connecting global and local messages, connections should be explicit, says Grossman. “Local country management must align their messaging and connect the dots between global messages and what’s happening in their country. Local messages should be built on top of global plans and messages. They can be different but there needs to be a connection to the bigger picture that’s overt and explicit.

“If global priorities are being communicated in the country, then the country manager must say ‘Here’s how this applies to us, here’s how we contribute, how we’re affected and how we fit in.’ This gives employees a much broader context to understand what’s going on and feel good about leadership, management, where the organization is going and how it plans to get there. That’s important in order to keep employees engaged.”

**David Grossman, President and Principal ThoughtPartner™, dg&a**  
dgrossman@yourthoughtpartner.com