

A NEW PURPOSE FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Flourish or languish? The ability to engage in authentic dialogue increasingly determines the agility and resilience of an organization. The new meaning of life for communication professionals is to help create a culture of vibrant dialogue with internal and external stakeholders, both on strategic issues and in daily collaboration.

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*Despite the unavoidable challenges, in the long run and when well-managed, a dialogue-driven communication strategy will generate far more trust and support, better decision-making and more effective execution of these decisions.*

Different playing field, different rules

The playing field for corporate communication professionals is not what it used to be. The world out there has become a very unforgiving place for old-school bureaucracies. Bureaucracies lack the agility to change course and innovate, which undermines the appeal of their products. A zero-sum game mindset inclines them to prefer short-term gains over sustainable, mutually rewarding relationships, undermining their license-to-operate. Bureaucracies have little to offer their employees in terms of growth opportunities, voice and autonomy, making them unattractive places to work.

In the fast-paced, information-rich world of today, bureaucratic organizations look like a fish flopping around on dry land. The age-old information monopoly that used to serve the powers that be so well, has all but been torn down by the rise of the internet and social media. Any kind of wrongdoing, whether real or fake, is bound to surface in the public domain sooner or later. In short, we are living in times of unprecedented transparency and organizations have nowhere to hide. Ignoring this reality, either in the form of a deadly lack of responsiveness or by denying the plainly visible facts, comes at the peril of ruining one's reputation and credibility.

The key challenge facing communication professionals in this new playing field is a very strategic one. It is to help the organization develop mutually rewarding relationships with key stakeholders, internally as well as externally, through targeted conversations rather than by trying to keep stakeholders in line by sending well-framed messages.

Netherlands

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Management by learning-by-doing

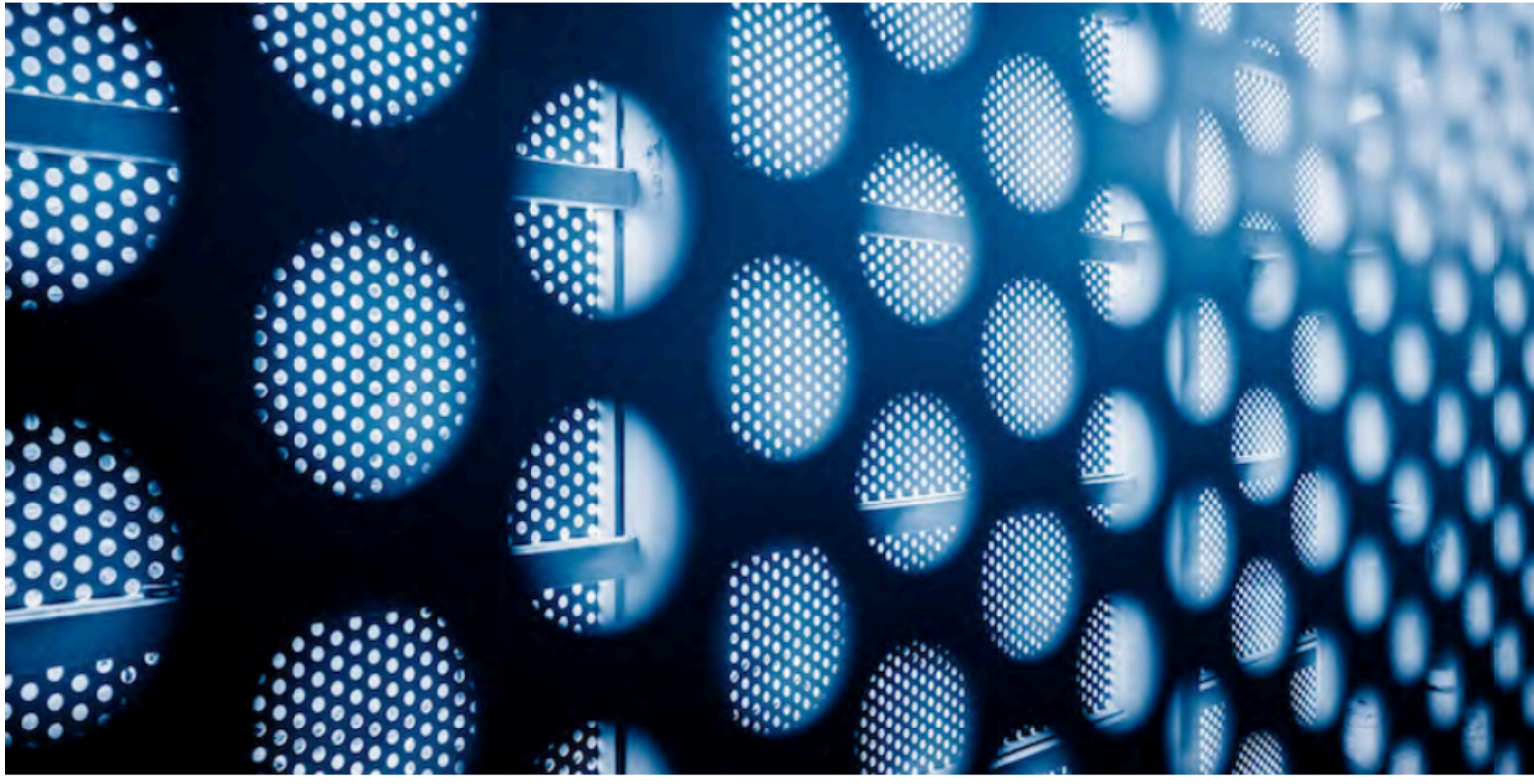
Internally the playing field is shifting as well and communication departments often struggle to keep up. Pushed by the demands of a changing external environment, organizational bureaucracies are almost frantically seeking to become agile and resilient, in other words, to become far more responsive. One way to make this happen is by pushing decision-making power down the hierarchy. Employees and teams are encouraged to take responsibility and apply learning-by-doing in short feedback loops. A pleasant side-effect of all this is that where once the principle of the carrot and the stick reigned supreme, a massive shift is taking place towards more positive and sustainable forms of motivation, neatly captured in the trinity of purpose, autonomy and learning.

Besides doing a better job in motivating people, another advantage of distributing power more evenly is that information and ideas spread far more easily, thus improving the quality of decision-making and accelerating innovation.

Shared meaning through strategic dialogue

Strategy used to be top management's prerogative. Today, strategy increasingly takes the shape of a conversation, sometimes involving the entire organization. IBM has repeatedly mobilized the brain power of tens of thousands of its employees across the globe in so-called "strategy jams". In a well-designed dialogue, the odds of mining really innovative ideas increases with the number of participants.

Creating a strategy is one thing, executing it is another. How is daily work impacted? Is team-X on the same page as team-Y when it comes to interpreting the strategy? What obstacles are frontline employees running into that may undermine effective execution of the strategy?



Fostering a culture of dialogue and feedback is key in addressing these internal and external challenges. Indeed, dialogue can be cumbersome and does not necessarily always result in the best decisions. Engaging in authentic dialogue inevitably means giving up a certain degree of control over the process and the outcome. Despite the unavoidable challenges, in the long run and when well-managed, a dialogue-driven communication strategy will generate far more trust and support, better decision-making and more effective execution of these decisions.

Building the communicative organization

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

Communication professionals need to focus more on supporting others in communicating and less on message crafting and channels and media. Which is not to say that content production and channel management will become obsolete. They will just reflect more points of view and play their part as vital pillars of a constructive, organization-wide dialogue.

Conducting the orchestra

An important job to be done in agile environments is the initiation and orchestration of strategic dialogue, for example any exchange of thoughts that could impact strategy formation and its execution. Purpose, content and structure of the dialogue need to be carefully designed, taking into account different views and interests. Participants must be provided with all relevant information in a timely manner. The dialogue itself should be conducted both efficiently and effectively, and the outcomes need to be shared promptly. And all this needs to be perceived by participants as fair process.

Four areas of attention

In the turbulent world of today an organization's ability to adapt to its environment has become a key survival skill. As a consequence, organizations need to let go of the paradigm of asymmetric corporate communication and become truly communicative. Communication professionals can make a priceless contribution to this transformation by focusing on four key areas of attention:

- 1. Fostering a communication climate that encourages employees to speak freely, raise problems and concerns, bring forward ideas and support colleagues.
- 2. Building an infrastructure that enables people to share information and provide feedback, both vertically and laterally. Channels, media, tools and apps, as well as supporting processes are the main pillars of this infrastructure.
- 3. Supporting skill development by providing training, education and coaching opportunities, aimed for example at improving listening skills, giving and receiving feedback and handling conflicts constructively.
- 4. Designing and orchestrating strategic dialogue events and trajectories. Such dialogue can serve to gather input for strategy formation, identify shared interests (or intractable conflicts) between organizational silo's or improve communication within teams and between managers and team-members. Dialogue can also be used to support knowledge-sharing and crowdsourcing initiatives.

Three Key Takeaways

- Traditional top-down corporate communication has become obsolete.
- The added value of corporate communication professionals is no longer to impose corporate truth but to facilitate authentic dialogue with stakeholders.
- Key focus areas are communication climate, communication infrastructure, dialogue skill development and strategic dialogue.