

Communication

Who didn't get the message? In news organizations, at one time or another, almost everybody. What are the best ways to get the message out, broadly and individually? And what are the best ways to hear back from the staff? Why are communications companies often so poor at this vital skill?

Sandy Rowe

Because I'm not as good at it as I want to be, I tell the editors to tell me when I'm not communicating with them well enough or when there are people in the department who need attention from me — who either need praise from me or who have concerns I can help with.

And so I've put the responsibility partly on the people who report to me.

Dick Wald

The best technique for getting a message out broadly is to leak it to a newspaper or magazine that most people read. Deal with the grapevine of normal talk. Encourage it enormously and drop into it those things that you need to spread around.

Mark Whitaker

I had been to a number of retreats. Frankly, I had more of the kind of rank-and-file view that they were sort of junkets and sort of a waste of time. You never remember what happened. So it was one of those cases where I tried to learn from not repeating the same mistakes.

I did two things. I made the writers and editors, not the top managers, responsible for leading the discussion sessions. Then I told "the Wallendas" (the top editors) that they could not say anything. I basically imposed a gag order for the entire time on the top editors. I said, your job is to listen. A lot of people there who had been to a number of these things said it was the most productive and most interesting session that they had had.

We were not coming down here to be lectured by the top editors about what the future of the magazine was. They were giving us the challenge of: You tell us what the future of the magazine is.

Matt Storin

If there's a problem in the room and you don't want to have a staff meeting, because it's going to draw too much attention to the issue, call one of those people (newsroom opinion leaders) in.

[They] know what's going on in the place. Your words, when you're the editor, carry a lot of weight. So if it's a water-cooler conversation or actually a trip to the office, you say, "I hear people are concerned about how we handled this latest civil rights issue in town and why we named the victim in a particular story."

And you say, "Well, this is what I was thinking. What do you think?" Make it conversation, not dictation. That is a good way of getting a message out without having to create a crisis where no crisis exists.

Jack Fuller

If it's important, a memo is not going to do it. People get too many of them, and they're not going to read them as carefully as you'd like them to.

I like having meetings, relatively small, with 15-20 people. I make myself available. I'll basically have a message and then have a conversation. I've found this approach to be burdensome [yet] essential.

Tom Johnson

Be truthful with your staff. Be truthful with the public. Whether it's your shareholders or others, be truthful.

I worry that we live in such a world of spin that we are not telling our staff, we are not telling our public, what actually is the situation. We are really falling into the trap, I think, that many businesses and governments have fallen into.

An occasional memo to the staff is a good, concrete way to get information out. And the town hall meeting has always worked well for me.

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your staff. Be truthful with the public. Whether
it's your shareholders or others, be truthful.**

Alberto Ibargüen

I talk to the editor every day, whether he needs it or not. He talks to me every day, whether I need it or not.

Arthur Sulzberger Jr.

Every year ... in my publisher role ... I do a "State of the Times" speech. We book a theater in Times Square, and I give the speech three or four times for the day staff. Then I go out to the plants and do day and night there. That's probably 20 to 30 minutes, if I can hold myself back, talking about the year that was, but more important, the year ahead — where our vision is, how we're doing against plans we've laid out, what

are the issues we're going to face, and then an hour Q&A. That's really fun. And thank God we're journalists, because the shyness goes away fast after the third journalist has tried to nail you.



The greatest joy of journalists is that they will always tell you what's on their minds. They're professional question askers and so from the news point of view, that's not hard.

I'm in the e-mail system and I get e-mails. This society can be a little more difficult ... so the first thing — and the thing I do the least well — is, get up out of your desk and start walking around. The desk can trap you.

Nancy Maynard

A good communications system really attempts to speak to each person individually, at some level and systematically. Say to yourself, "I haven't had lunch with Jackie in four months." Then, know what she cares about and listen to the things that she's trying to get done. It's work to be a good leader. You can't do it all the time, but you have to have a way of keeping track, of knowing what your contact is. Make certain it's regular.

It's work to be a good leader.

When Bob (co-publisher) was ill with cancer and was in treatment, he was out of the building a great deal of the time. I would keep a list of the departments he had visited. So we would work our way around the building including midnight dinners with printers and pressroom. It wasn't our schedule, it was theirs. It was important because economic conditions brought contentious and very hard times. But at least our employees knew that we understood their concerns.

Steve Isenberg

We need to talk about frequency rather than methodology. For instance, if you choose to communicate only infrequently, that's already a sign and a danger to an organization. With people, you're visible, you're walking around, you're listening and you're talking, you're sending praising memos, you're sending memos that say, "Here are the things that we're not so good at that we've got to work on."

Karen Jurgensen

When it was announced that I was going to take over as editor of the paper, I ran into Jim Johnson (a business executive). And I said, "Do you have any management tips for me? How should I do this?" So I have this little list that's based on a five-minute encounter with him in an elevator lobby. He said, "First of all, you have to figure out how to deal with stress. Exercise. Then, trust your team. Get everyone on board for your goals, keep momentum going; stage ideas over time. Communicate with your staff. Use big meetings, direct letters, telecommunications, everything."

So in a way, this is my guide to management. Communication is something that I spend a huge amount of my day on and others on my staff do as well. We do it a lot of different ways.

We do a daily e-mail that critiques the day's paper, but is not a "gotcha," it's a positive note. It's about the things we did right. We believe that if you reinforce the things that are working well, you'll get more of those things.



My immediate management group meets once a week. We meet typically for as long as four or five hours every Tuesday afternoon if we have a packed agenda. And we work very hard on what our goals are, what our issues are and how we ought to address them. And that immediately gets translated into conversations with their deputies, and the deputies filter [the messages] down.

Jay Harris

Most of us, particularly those of us who would like to think we are wordsmiths, think that we can tell something to someone one time and they will understand it. My experience has proven to me that the odds of that happening are very low indeed.

So you need to tell them and tell them again. And look for different ways to communicate.

William Hearst III

(Entrepreneur) Jim Barksdale told me one time that the essential skills are shoot, move and communicate.

[You can get a] feeling that it is lonely at the top and therefore not possible communicating with the middle. And that's a big mistake. It's a real limitation. There are very few things that you can say, "If you do it that way, you'll fail." In fact, if you look at leadership across a very wide spectrum, there are so many ways to succeed. There may be a lot more ways to fail, but it's pretty obvious that there are people of great success with radically different approaches to leadership. But not being a good communicator may be one of those universals.

Sandy Rowe

[Best is] face-to-face, direct, looking someone in the eye.