

The Corporate Communicator's Lot Is Not an Easy One

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What does corporate communications do? That seems to be a dumb question, but it isn't. Not really. The job is a jumble of responsibilities and coordination that does not fit easily into an organization chart. In fact, the job is not easy to understand, even within a matrix of responsibilities.

Corporate communications is a staff function that melds message creation with media responsibility, coordination of message and media and media production. But how it does that varies by company and CEO.

The communications matrix (p. 6ff) shows audience communications responsibility in a typical company. The CEO and Board have overall responsibility for strategy and communications of strategy. Senior executives reporting to the CEO implement strategy with internal and external audiences essential to the survival and success of the organization. The head of corporate communications is directly

responsible for assisting the CEO and Board with the primary strategic message but indirectly responsible for other key audiences.

This creates a problem. The primary message is translated into secondary messages needed to implement strategy. The secondary messages are what target audiences see most. While the corporate communicator has firm responsibility for the primary message, other corporate departments control secondary messages.

Executives in charge of corporate departments are the primary communicators to their discrete audiences. The Corporate Communicator advises them and only sometimes has direct responsibility for communicating to customers, employees, shareholders, etc.

Unfortunately, in most organizations, secondary messages tend to veer over time from the strategic message. They blur the strategic message or make it implicit.

In corporate communications, the strategic message, an organization's reason for existence, is either implicit or explicit. Executives and employees are supposed to know why they do what they do, and the CEO reminds them lest they forget and veer from the mission. Unfortunately, it is easy to veer off course. All organizations suffer from entropy, a loss of energy tending to disorder and chaos.

In most organizations, message blurring does not produce immediate impact. Messages are close enough that an organization and audience understand what a business is about. And, the strategic message is often integrated with the product and service.

Damage occurs when an organization needs to adapt, when messages sent by each department are no longer apt for audiences and when an audience's embedded expectation must change in face of facts. Then, secondary messages that blur the strategic message or use it implicitly become traps that bog organizations and slow execution.

CEOs place high value on execution and speed. They want flexible, adaptable organizations that move quickly to capitalize on opportunities before competitors do. They rely on their formal and informal communications networks to guide the organization into new directions. But communications are not simple and messages

radiate across an organization in many ways. Sometimes they flow down the chain of command smoothly from CEO to clerk. But they also rise vertically to the CEO with no reference to adjacent departments, or they spill horizontally to adjacent departments and never rise to the top, or they flood in all different directions. In the process, the meaning of a message can be distorted or lost.

For example, a business opportunity is disassembled as it moves through the organization. One department looks at numbers while another examines concepts, a third examines the audience, a fourth the logistics, a fifth, the regulatory aspects and so on. The nature of disassembly is such that an opportunity can lose importance and value while an organization digests it. Communications facilitate evaluation of an opportunity, remind individuals of a need for speed and maintain a holistic view of an opportunity that lies in pieces around a company.

The role of the Corporate Communicator is to help the CEO project the holistic view throughout the company, to keep executives focused on strategy lest they get sidetracked into irrelevant or unprofitable activity. The corporate communicator helps make the implicit explicit through connecting dots between secondary and primary messages. The corporate communicator is part of the CEO's communication machinery to guide employees, customers, shareholders, regulators and others into a proper view of the company and its mission.

But this is not all that corporate communications does.

Corporate communications serves the CEO and senior executives in various ways. Sometimes the department drives a message, sometimes it coordinates, sometimes it facilitates in developing and executing media and sometimes it is a feedback point for target audiences. Corporate communications does not have a function like a factory in which components enter at one end and autos leave at the other. It is closer to grease that keeps machinery work smoothly or regulators to prevent machines from stamping parts out of tolerance. But it is focused on the strategic message, the why of the organization's existence and it supports message execution through its production facilities, if it has them. Consistent with its amorphous function, corporate communications also serves as the primary contact for some audiences, such as reporters and editors who broadcast the company's intents, successes and failures.

The job of a corporate communications executive, then, is equally unclear. Department executives are justified in asking what a corporation communications leader is doing at their meetings. Moreover, when a CEO fails to support the corporate communications leader, the job is well nigh impossible. There is nothing a corporate communications leader can do but plead for

integration of messages then suffer the torment of watching advice being ignored.

The matrix shows why this is so. The corporate communicator is in a third or fourth position on the chart except in dealing with media. Hence, it is easy for executives to dispatch the corporate communicator as a media relations person who provides production support, if executives choose to use it. It is easier still to subordinate the corporate communicator just to one role among several the communicator should be performing – for example, working with business media. It is endemic that corporate communication's function is fractioned with departments taking a portion of the job and cutting it from corporate communications – e.g., marketing controls marketing publicity and Investor Relations controls shareholder communications while Information Technology controls the Web page. Further, the corporate communications leader is often at a lower rank than heads of other departments and open to treatment as a subordinate of multiple bosses, all of whom want their needs served now.

The result over time is what a CEO should not want – dilution of the primary message in favor of secondary messages. Marketing focuses on selling and ignores shareholders. Investor relations focuses on shareholders and forgets operations. Operations focuses on manufacturing and logistics and pays no attention to Human Resources.

Corporate communications is only as strong as a CEO allows it to be, and the corporate communications leader gains strength in direct proportion to personal credibility the leader has with the CEO.

If the CEO has high regard for the head of corporate communications, the leader can become a communications adviser and counselor across the organization. Departmental and division executives dare not ignore the head of corporate communications and more likely, they welcome the leader because he or she provides insight into how messages are likely to be received internally and externally.

If a CEO has little regard for the head of corporate communications, the leader has no place at meetings in which the future of the organization and its opportunities are decided. The corporate communicator becomes little more than a media relations person and functionary who supports departmental requests for writing, media placement, events, promotions and multimedia production.

The same thing happens if a CEO considers the corporate communications leader to be a personal publicist for the CEO. The head of corporate communications becomes an aide-de-camp for arranging speeches, coordinating interviews, writing remarks and advising the CEO how to respond to crises and opportunities. When this

happens, the corporate communicator is more of a barrier than facilitator internally. Other executives are left to fend for themselves and their communications needs.

There are more ways for corporate communications to be misapplied than used correctly. And, that, in my experience is the case. Alternate uses of corporate communications are more the rule than exception. Because of this, one should ask whether corporate communications should be dispensed with as a function. Would it not be better to establish a communications structure that accounts more for the reality of an organization than the desire of corporate communications leadership? This appears to have been done in some organizations, but there are ramifications in changing structure.

For one, the CEO works harder to maintain the strategic vision throughout the organization. The burden is on the CEO to review what divisions and departments are communicating and to rein them in. Secondly, there is diminution of the strategic message over time by comparison to secondary messages in which departments have vested interest. The CEO works harder to fight entropy. Third, there is a loss of insight into what departments are doing as they communicate. A corporate communicator, when used well, provides eyes and ears for the CEO on communications matters and a warning device for

the CEO when departments stray off message. Fourth, there is loss of practical communications advice to departments, which departments need in their work. Fifth, there is loss of proportion about communications. Executives are trained in control. They control operations, messages and media. But unfortunately, communications results are often uncontrolled because they go to unpredictable humans who understand messages in different ways. A corporate communicator understands this well – or should.

In some organizations, corporate communications is a place to dump communications functions no one wants or knows what to do with. It is like Human Resources, a repository for functions no one else wants. Because of this broad responsibility and amorphous mission, corporate communications is destined in some organizations to live in shadows – used but not appreciated and dismissed when there is no perceived need for it. The corporate communications practitioner accepts this as a condition of the job and works to show the value of what the department does.

The reward for good internal merchandising of the function's value is an increase in credibility with the CEO and senior executives. The punishment for failure to show what one has done lately for the CEO is dismissal from the job or the humiliation of

watching someone else placed between the corporate communicator and the CEO. That executive is often from Human Resources or administration.

Corporate communications is not a business for the fainthearted.

A Note on the Matrix.

The matrix starts with the message receiver and works down through message-sender, messages and media. Normally, a diagram would start with executives, the message-senders, and work down to message receivers. This reversed presentation recognizes that communications get others to do something and unless they do it, there is no organization. Customers must buy goods and services. Employees must make and deliver them. Owners must risk capital with an expectation of suitable return. Regulators must trust a company enough to permit it to exist.

Reversing the matrix and putting the audience at the top recognizes what is often forgotten in organizations. They do not exist for and communicate to themselves. They exist for what they achieve outside of themselves.

Communications Matrix

Audiences	Overall	Customers					Owners			
	Segments	Loyal	Occasional	Potential	Former	Competitors	Buy-side	Sell-side	Individual	Internal
Direct Responsibility	CEO & Board	Marketing/Sales					CFO			
Primary Message/Strategy	CEO & Board	CEO					CEO			
Secondary Messages	Corp Com	Marketing/Sales					CFO			
Message transmission	Corp Com	Marketing/Sales					Investor Relations			
Primary/2dry message coord		Corp Com					Corp Com			
Internal Media Support	Corp Com Production	Corp Com Production					Corp Com Production			

Audiences	Internal/Employees							Govt/Regulators				
	CEO	Board	Mngrl	Supervisors	Customer-facing	Support	Retirees	Federal	State	Local	Intl	Industry Assoc
Direct Responsibility	Human Resources							Govt Affairs/Legal				
Primary Message/Strategy	CEO							CEO				
Secondary Messages	Human Resources							Govt Affairs/Legal				
Message transmission	Human Resources							Govt Affairs/Legal				
Primary/2dry message coord	Corp Com							Corp Com				
Internal Media Support	Corp Com							Corp Com				
	Production							Production				

Audiences	Internal Communications			Influentials	
	Network	Databases	Operations	Media	3rd-party Testers
Direct Responsibility	CIO		Operations	Corp Com	Developers
Primary Message/Strategy	CEO		CEO	CEO	CEO
Secondary Messages	CIO		Operations	Corp. Comm	Developers
Message transmission	CIO		Operations	Corp. Comm	Corp. Comm
Primary/2dry message coord	Corp Com		Corp Com	Corp. Comm	Corp. Comm
Internal Media Support	Corp Com		Corp Com	Corp Com	Corp Com
	Production		Production	Production	Production

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