

New Year's Communication

Overview

In our view, each new year affords senior leaders a unique opportunity to set their organization's tone, focus, and expectations for the coming 12 months. As such, we recommend that all leaders consider how they might use this opportunity to their advantage, and that they commit to do so—not just this year, but every year.

Guidelines

As you consider your leadership communication for the coming year, we offer the following thoughts:

- **Appreciate that as a senior leader you can only effectively communicate three or four strategic-level messages over the course of one year.** Many don't, and end up confusing the employee population with a large number of strategic messages, each of which appears disconnected and in competition with the others. Such undisciplined messaging is one of the primary drivers of an employee perception we see all too often—that each new initiative or area of organizational focus is the “flavor of the month.”
- **Strategically select your three or four most important messages for the coming year and formally consider them your strategic “message agenda.”** Given that you can only effectively communicate three or four strategic-level messages in a given year, set an agenda of what you hope to communicate to the organization in the next twelve months, and never vary from that message agenda. To set your message agenda for the year, ask yourself these questions:
 - ◆ “What do I want to introduce to employees that they don't yet know?”
 - ◆ “What do I want to clarify for employees that they don't currently understand?”
 - ◆ “What do I want employees to do?”

Examples of answers might be: “I want employees to know how the market is changing, I want them to better understand our new measurement process, and I want quality to improve.” If you have more than four, that's too many. Make these topics and behaviors your message agenda, and beat the bully pulpit with them for 12 months in every message opportunity you have.

- **Select a single strategy message that will be your primary message for the coming year and the capstone to your message agenda.** As a capstone to the short agenda of what you want employees to know, understand, and do, decide upon a single way of articulating your organization's overall strategy. This is not a vision statement or a mission statement—it's a simple, actionable, and broad way of describing *what* the organization is doing and *why*. This strategic message is the “main thing”—it should be able to explain everything you plan to do in the coming year, and should also explain everything on your message agenda. It is your primary message, the one you invoke first and most often, and for the next year your main thing is to “keep the main thing the main thing.”

- **Don't let your strategy message and message agenda fade over time.** Set a reminder to yourself to revisit your message agenda in six months, and again at the end of the year, to test its continued relevance and ensure it's receiving the focus it should without being diluted by competing topics. If something on the agenda is truly no longer relevant, replace it with something that is (again using the employees know/understand/do questions). Also check to see if the messages you're promoting mid-year are still the messages on your agenda—or if you've introduced new messages to the mix.

The key is discipline—if you have new messages in the system, either formally make them one of the three or four items on your agenda, or dramatically reduce their prominence. Again: You can only effectively communicate a small number of strategic-level messages at a time, and attempting to communicate more contributes to perceptions of uncommitted and non-credible leadership.

- **Get the word out before the end of January, and do so with all levels of leadership as well as with line employees.** The ability to credibly use the new year as a tool for framing strategic messages and expectations disappears by February. As such, if you intend to take advantage of this message opportunity, you should do so ASAP. In doing so, we recommend favoring interactive media where you are the primary message vehicle over media products (such as videos, emails, or newsletter articles). Interactive media are much better suited to effectively communicating strategic information, are significantly more persuasive, and maximize your ability to reinforce and expand your leadership presence. As a straw model of what a strong approach might look like, we suggest communicating New Year's messages:
 - ♦ With your management team face-to-face
 - ♦ With your leadership population, down to and including managers, via a facilitated conference call
 - ♦ With line managers, via group meetings (with up to 50 participants each) on-site, or via a series of facilitated conference calls
 - ♦ With all employees, via a letter sent to their homes
- **Use each forum to communicate your strategy and your expectations for the coming year—both globally and locally.** In whatever communication forums you create, keep the agenda simple: communicate your overall strategy message, describe your expectations for 2003, and provide more than enough opportunity for people to ask questions. In each instance, “translate” your overall strategy and expectations into the audience's local context. For your strategy message, share your overall strategy, and then communicate how you think that strategy will take form for the audience in question. In setting expectations, do the same: share first what you expect will occur—in the form of new initiatives or significant policy decisions—over the year for the entire organization, and then for the audience in question. In each case, clearly tie each initiative or decision back to your overall strategy message—doing so will go a long way in convincing the audience that you and your strategy are credible.

Also share your expectations related to performance for the new year. In doing so, speak to the organization as a whole as well as the audience you face, tie each performance expectation back to your strategy message, and wherever possible, invoke metrics that you'll use to track performance (and that also reinforce your overall strategy message). As an example, if your overall strategy is to be more competitive by improving quality, set expectations for the quality initiatives that will occur in the new year, discuss the quality-related performance you expect to see, and invoke the metrics you'll use to track quality over time.



In summary, recognize each new year for the communication opportunity it is and take full advantage. In doing so:

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- **Strategically select your three or four most important messages for the coming year and formally consider them your strategic “message agenda.”**
- **Select a single strategy message that will be your primary message for the coming year and the capstone to your message agenda.**
- **Don't let your strategy message and message agenda fade over time.**
- **Get the word out before the end of January, and do so with all levels of leadership as well as with line employees.**
- **Use each forum to communicate your strategy and your expectations for the coming year—both globally and locally.**

The occasions in which leaders can provide clarity of focus and strategically manage expectations for their entire organization don't come often. We hope you'll take the opportunity to do so this and every year, and that the thoughts above are useful as you do.