12 Strategies for Improving Communication Across Your Organization
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If your organization has nailed internal communication, there’s no need to read on. If all of your team members report feeling informed, with a clear understanding of the organization’s priorities, direction and plans for getting there, you have succeeded where most struggle and strain to make inroads.

But… if communication across units, shifts, locations and teams is disjointed or dysfunctional, and if you feel like rumors flow through the grapevine far more effectively than your official messages circulate, these tips are designed for you.

Table of Contents

1. Optimize huddles ........................................................................................................................................... 3
2. Prepare middle managers as messengers ................................................................................................. 4
3. Think beyond the written word .................................................................................................................. 5
4. Meet employees where they are at – literally ............................................................................................. 6
5. Re-think your newsletters ............................................................................................................................ 8
6. Know your audiences ................................................................................................................................... 9
7. Establish a consistent cadence in messages (and then defy expectations) ............................................ 10
8. Create a central communication hub – but don’t over rely on it .............................................................. 11
9. Think vertically and horizontally ................................................................................................................ 12
10. Create calls to action .................................................................................................................................. 13
11. Tell employees first ..................................................................................................................................... 14
12. Connect the What, When, Who and How to the WHY ............................................................................ 15
Effective communication amidst members of any group – be it a family, a social circle or a workplace – is a challenging proposition. After all, there’s the message itself (i.e. what is meant), what is actually conveyed by the communicator and finally, how that message is interpreted by the recipient (if it even reaches them at all!).

A breach within any of one of these elements damages the flow of information. Just think of the children’s game Telephone where one child whispers a message to another who passes it on until the message makes its way all around the circle. Invariably, by the time the message returns to its originator, it is barely recognizable. Now, overlay the unique complexities of a healthcare workplace where communication has to reach employees who:

- Work across shifts
- Are stretched for time
- Spend much of their time with patients, with limited access to email or an intranet
- May not even have an email account
- Are multigenerational and come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with a range of education and literacy levels.

Given all these complicating factors, the search for a one-size-fits-all communication magic bullet is futile. In fact, of the twelve strategies presented here, no singular strategy alone will change your communication game. They are meant to work together to address the communication needs of a large, spread-out, busy and diverse workforce, and to fit with how teams today operate and receive information.
Huddles are brief touchpoints among all members of a work group or team that occur according to a pre-determined schedule, often daily. Huddles are not only a communication strategy for patient care teams. They can be implemented with any work team within the organization. They are an important communication tool because they:

**Happen Regularly.** Huddles are built into the team’s work flow, which ensures a regular dosing of the most important information the team needs to know.

**Are To the Point.** Think of a huddle on the football field. It’s a brief check-in amidst a flurry of activity to make sure everyone is on the same page and doing what needs to be done to create a successful result. Huddles occur wherever it is most convenient for employees to congregate and then quickly disperse to go back to their work. Make a commitment to the duration of your huddle – 5 minutes, 15 minutes – and stick to it. Then narrow in on the most important information that must be conveyed within that limited time period.

**Occur In Person.** Unlike emails, newsletters and bulletin boards, huddles provide the opportunity to check in with employees on their understanding and reactions to the messages being communicated. Furthermore, because they pull all members of the team together, huddles allow for in-the-moment troubleshooting.
2. PREPARE MANAGERS AS MESSENGERS

Those who work most closely with teams will naturally be the most trusted sources of information. It is essential, therefore, to equip managers with the knowledge they need AND the tools and structures to communicate effectively with their team.

For example, teams at Enloe Medical Center in Chico, California use 5MMs (5 Minute Meetings—see figure) as a way of standardizing some of the key information to be shared during huddles. The 5MM is a one page report summarizing important organizational changes or updates. The tool supports managers in transitioning from information gatherers to effective information-spreaders.

For more in-depth discussions, consider providing managers with slide decks, complete with talking points in the notes sections or a “meeting in a box” which includes talking points, handouts and discussion prompts for specific areas for feedback.

Of course, preparing managers as messengers is not merely a matter of circulating common talking points. Just as they will be sharing these updates with their teams in-person, so too should they have the opportunity to hear it directly from leadership. Invite managers to participate in briefings with the leadership team.

During these briefings, leadership:

- Reviews pertinent information (including the “why” behind decisions and initiatives – see page 15.)
- Invites discussion from managers
- Establishes the expectation for managers to share the information with their teams.

Preparing managers to be effective messengers, however, does not replace the value of employees hearing directly from top leadership. It is mutually beneficial for senior leaders to periodically attend team meetings to personally share new information and hear feedback directly from staff.
In all your communications, the use of simple graphics, charts, photos and even videos can help to draw employees’ attention and make the information easier to digest. What’s more, not all information needs to be presented visually. For instance, every week at Enloe Medical Center, a senior leader records a brief voice mail update that can be accessed by all employees either on their computers or via a dedicated phone line.

Video can also be an invaluable tool for internal communication. Even low-cost, simple videos can engage employees in a way that it will be difficult for print communication to match. They can serve up a lot of information in a short amount of time, making them a particularly convenient option for time-pressed employees. The Enloe team complements the weekly phone messages with video updates from members of their leadership team, which are uploaded to the intranet.
Work in any healthcare setting occurs at a rapid pace. Employees are often on the go, rightly so focused on being as responsive as possible to patients and their families. That means traditional means of organizational communication, like emails and newsletters, can easily get lost in the shuffle of daily work as inboxes get flooded and newsletters are cast aside to read “when time allows” (as if that ever happens).

If you want your messages to reach employees, you must serve them up where employees spend their time. Easily updated communication boards in work areas (such as Hartford Healthcare’s visual management board featured here) can be helpful for better accessing employees who rarely have the opportunity to check email (as well as employees who don’t have an email address). These communication boards should focus in on information specific to individuals in those areas. For instance, team updates, progress toward team goals, recognition of team members, and areas in need of attention.
For information on organization-wide initiatives, posters, bulletin boards, table tents, screen savers and digital signage may all be avenues for reaching employees where they are at. When considering optimal placement, consider these questions:

- Where do employees congregate?
- Where do they eat?
- Where do they clock-in?
- Where do they wait for shuttles to parking lots or public transportation?

**High Tech Approaches For Reaching Employees**

For a more proactive approach, consider communication vehicles that enable you to push out information blasts that reach everyone on staff wherever they are, such as Yammer (an organization-specific networking tool) or push notifications from the organization’s intranet. The ability to reach employees on their cell phones through mobile apps or company chat software can significantly enhance perceptions of connectedness and collaboration – and it is increasingly how many individuals expect to receive information. For example, we have seen great use of technology in Malaysia by Planetree sites that are a part of the KPJ system. The teams use What’s App chat groups to promote real time communication with different staff communities.

**High Touch Approaches: Leadership Rounds**

For a more “high-touch” approach to meeting employees where they’re at, implement leadership rounds. These rounds are purposefully designed to ensure all employees have the opportunity to hear directly from leadership about organizational priorities and operational plans, and to respond with feedback, ideas and questions. Being deliberate about associating the rounds with a specific communication campaign can help to focus the interactions.

At Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, New York, maximizing interactions between leadership and the staff is essential to sustaining staff engagement in patient and family centered care. Each month the CEO makes rounds with a tea cart to each nursing unit and department. The treats on the tea cart are meant to provide both nourishment and appreciation to the staff, as well as to open up the lines of communication with the CEO and other senior leaders.
Other than email, there is perhaps no more widely used internal communication tool in healthcare workplaces than newsletters. But just because they are widely used, doesn’t mean they are effective! Most newsletters are published on a pre-determined schedule according to an established template. That means that the content is largely driven by those deadlines and formatting demands as opposed to the content being driven by the needs of the recipient.

When considering the needs of the recipients, it is essential to understand that within your workforce, there are a range of preferences and expectations for receiving information. In particular, be aware of generational differences and be prepared to accommodate these differences by disseminating information through different channels. While newsletters may be one such channel, it will be important to supplement the traditional newsletter with alternative communication channels that embrace current technologies.

First things first, complete an inventory of your current newsletters. Where is there redundancy? Where could you consolidate? How do you gauge how effectively each is reaching the target audience? For e-newsletters or email blasts, see if you have access to analytics data to research how readers are engaging with the material.

For a more user-centered approach, consider supplementing traditional newsletters that feature numerous articles on different topics with more frequent, but targeted news blasts. They can be targeted both in content (i.e. one key update versus several updates provided all at once) and in audience (i.e. recipients can be segments based on their role, location, etc.).
Information clutter occurs when the sheer quantity of information being disseminated overwhelms the recipient to the point that they can no longer absorb it. In a cluttered information state, all messages are created equally, which chips away at the recipient’s ability to discern what information is “need to know” versus “nice to know.”

Sending communications (alerts, emails, newsletters, mailings, etc.) to all employees may seem like a good safeguard against lack of information. Mass communication may also seem like an appropriate response to employees’ desires for greater transparency. However, when information relevant only to a subset of your workforce is consistently sent to all, communication channels get clogged. In this case, less is definitely more. Fewer messages that reach the right audiences are far more effective than lots of messages being sent to all.

Ask yourself:
- For which segments of the workforce, is this “need to know” information vs. “nice to know” information?
- For the “need to know” groups, how can the message be tailored so that it feels most pertinent?
- For the “nice to know” groups, how can the message be conveyed in a way that does not clog up communication channels (and potentially distract from other “need to know” communications)?

These same principles apply to in-person meetings and presentations. All employee meetings should be reserved to share updates that are indeed pertinent to all employees. In the spirit of knowing your audience, consider adopting more of a Ted-style talk for these all-employee sessions. In other words, a tight presentation from senior leadership that focuses in on the most important points. Tangential or extraneous details are cut out in order to help the audience narrow in on the key pieces of information you want them to absorb, and more to the point, to act on. These Ted-style talks can be followed up by team meetings in which the team leader expands on the content, accentuating how the updates pertain specifically to that team.
Another way to break through information clutter is to establish a consistent way that information is presented. Setting patterns for information-sharing can help to keep messages clear and direct. A common example is use of the **SBAR (Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation)** technique. Whether it be an in-person conversation or written correspondence, this approach serves as a shared communication framework that all staff become familiar with. Other examples of standardizing guidelines and templates are expanded on below.

- **Meeting agendas.** A standardized meeting agenda template can help to reinforce organizational priorities by connecting the dots between the agenda items and the organization’s strategic aims. At Fauquier Hospital, all department directors use the same staff meeting template. This creates harmony in how strategic priorities are represented and related to departmental initiatives.

- **Staff communication boards.** Standardizing staff communication boards in all departments and units reduces signage clutter and streamlines information flow. In one central area, you can convey to the team the information they need to know on a daily basis – announcements, upcoming events and meetings, staff updates, and progress against established goals.

Staff communication boards can also be used to solicit information from staff to guide future work. At VA Sierra Nevada, huddle boards across departments are updated at the beginning of each shift with a quick assessment of the current state. Status is identified by a green dot for “good to go” and a red dot for “needs attention.” Areas of concern are escalated as necessary every morning to ensure appropriate operational status and support. Any staff member can write updates on the board, as they “own” it, and management can quickly see status during leadership rounds.

**Defy Expectations**

Implementing standardized approaches such as these also opens the door for you catch peoples’ attention by violating the very expectations you set. Humor, a personal story, even adopting a different structure, look or tone from typical communications can help to maximize the impact of a message that you really need to break through and make an impression on recipients.
Don’t confuse an intranet as a centralized hub of information with the intranet as the centerpiece of your internal communication strategy. Most traditional intranets may indeed provide information, but they often fail to engage employees for these reasons:

- **They are not personal.** Intranets are a repository of information, but they provide little opportunity to clarify how the information may be personally relevant to different subgroups within the workforce.

- **They inundate.** Seeking out information about organizational priorities and initiatives from the intranet can feel like trying to get a sip of water out of a firehose – especially when information is regularly added, but not archived at a similar pace. Processes must be implemented to maintain the intranet so that information is easily accessible, with the most current and relevant information most prominent.

- **They are difficult to navigate.** The purpose of an intranet is to enable employees to access information that will help them to be more productive and effective in their roles. This efficiency equation falls apart when information can not be readily found. Having a logical organizational scheme and an effective search functionality can help to alleviate these challenges.

- **They lack effective avenues for bi-directional communication.** Often intranets are a source of what leadership needs the workforce to know – a more high tech version of the traditional employee handbook. But what about the other way around? Look into the functionality of your intranet to support collaboration and information-sharing across teams and sectors of the organization.

- **Access barriers.** Unless all staff have uniform access to the tool, it is not an equal opportunity communication vehicle. As with all the communication strategies outlined here, whenever planning an organization-wide communication effort, special consideration must be given to how you will reach the hardest to reach employees, including those who do not have regular access to a computer or email.
A key component of any organizational communication strategy must be avenues for communicating and collaborating across sectors. This is essential for coordination, efficiency and avoiding redundancy. And it is precisely why the Planetree Person-Centered Care Certification standards are explicit that the composition of the person-centered care steering committee should be multi-disciplinary and include a mix of both management and non-supervisory staff. This composition sets up the effort for success by putting in place a structure that enhances both vertical and horizontal flow of information.

This can also be accomplished through a shared governance structure which empowers frontline staff as both receivers AND providers of information. Sharp Memorial Hospital’s collaborative governance structure is organized around unit practice councils for most patient care units and support departments. A Clinical Practice Council is comprised of bedside representatives from departments across the hospital. Members are expected to not only share information, but also to bring forth feedback from their teams. This commitment to vertical and horizontal information flow is further demonstrated through the hospital’s Daily Reliability Huddle and the associated daily management system. These structures support a tiered reporting process to assure hospital leadership receives feedback from frontline staff related to barriers to patient care and the impact of changes to patients, families and staff. In turn, timely reporting of issues allows a shortened response time and enhanced understanding of the issues. See VA Sierra Nevada’s Huddle Boards for another example of vertical and horizontal information flow.

These structures rely on invested managers who are adequately supported to represent key points (see #2 Prepare Managers as Messengers), as well as clear messages that are consistently disseminated across all supervisors (see #7 Establish a Consistent Cadence in Messages).
10. CREATE CALLS TO ACTION

A call to action is the difference between providing information to increase knowledge and providing information to spur productive activity.

As you craft every piece of communication, ask yourself: What do you want the recipient to do with this information?

The answer to that question should be explicitly stated – in clear, concise terms – in the message. Doing so will shape the response – often from a neutral “good to know” to a “this is what I need to do” mentality.
11. TELL EMPLOYEES FIRST

Oftentimes, the most tricky communication challenges occur when there is little time to plan – a crisis, breaking news (good or bad) or time-sensitive updates. In particular, when the information to be relayed will reach both internal and external audiences, one fundamental rule to follow is to tell employees before anyone else.

The nature of the information will drive the communication vehicles used for dissemination, though it is likely you will draw on a combination of the strategies outlined in the preceding pages. Given the pace of information-sharing these days, time is likely of the essence. Your goal is for employees to hear these types of updates from a trusted internal source before they stumble across it on social media, in the mainstream news, or hear it through the rumor mill. This builds trust and good will and can go a long way toward engaging employees as communication ambassadors.
12. CONNECT THE WHAT, WHERE, WHEN AND WHO TO THE WHY

As we strive to meet employees where they’re at and keep messages to the point, it is essential to understand that the “WHY” behind the changes being explained or the events that have occurred is not extraneous information. Connecting the dots between the what, when, who and how to the WHY is a key strategy for making information relevant and personal. Consider these two scenarios:

A Planetree team is coming on site to complete focus groups with patients, families and staff. During morning huddle, the team lead tells staff they will all participate in a focus group, provides instruction on how to sign up and explains the plan to provide coverage for employees who are participating in the focus group.

The Result? All team members understand what is expected of them and know how to take the necessary steps to participate. However, after the huddle, there is a lot of grumbling about this intrusion to the work day. Staff is skeptical about how what they say in the focus group will be used.

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Same scenario. During morning huddle, the team lead shares the same information and then goes on to explain that the knowledge gained from the focus groups will guide future planning. She reiterates the importance of being thoughtful and honest during the discussions, which will remain anonymous. After providing instruction on how to sign up to participate, the team lead invites anyone with any questions or concerns to share them.

The Result? All team members understand what is expected of them and know how to take the necessary steps to participate. They also feel good to work for an organization that values what they have to say and they are looking forward to hearing the findings from the sessions.

**The Takeaway?**

If people understand the reason behind what you’re asking them to do or what you’re telling them about, they are more inclined to give their support.
Looking for more support to improve organizational communication or to create or strengthen an organizational culture of person-centered care? Planetree is here to help.

Check out practical tools and resources available at www.planetree.org/resources. Planetree also offers a range of on-site coaching and training opportunities. Our Experience Advisers will partner with you to develop and implement a customized implementation plan. For more information, go to planetree.org or call 203-732-1365.