

Designed Communication III

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The Opportunity

Internal communication is a hard initiative for some executives to get their ROI-driven heads around. This is the case in this opportunity. The CEO finds it difficult to successfully measure an “idea” that is not impacted by product design, specific business unit solutions, or that does not immediately or directly impact the bottom line. The culture of this employee-owned organization could be dramatically impacted and improved through intentional efforts and an official initiative designed to re-establish a waning trust in corporate leadership and well-preached culture of employee ownership.

While leadership intentionally established an employee-ownership culture, the CEO’s traditional corporate leanings do not support or set an example of such beliefs. Executive leadership speaks to pride and purpose in employee-ownership and the absolute value of employee-owners in the day-to-day and future success of the organization. However, through repeated rounds of layoffs and director-level communications from executive leadership stressing profitability over all else “in order to improve share value for all,” the organization has failed to engage the employee base beyond “lip service” to facilitate increased productivity.

This organization would greatly benefit from a formal action research project allowing a new depth of communication to take hold during the initiative, as well, as allowing analytical substance to why communication is so critical and what constituents feel is healthy and fitting of the culture. It is also the perfect opportunity for me to be the action researcher in the initiative as the communication position is less than a year old for the organization. This helps substantiate the need for a formal approach to establish a base-line and help in establishing a strategic communication plan.

The Fit

Strengths. Leadership selects one of the eight organizational passions to focus on each year. While communication is not a passion, it impacts each of them. The fact that the organization is not opposed to longer term initiatives is a strength. Employees are predisposed to a readiness for involvement or action in these initiatives, albeit, not to the level an action research initiative may require.

Another strength is that executive level leadership has “instructed” me to operate the new communications department as if it is a company I own. Therefore an action research initiative presented as part of a strategic communication plan might gain more support from leadership.

Limitations. As is referenced by Coghlan and Brannick in *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, “Pasmore points to failure to heed objective signals indicating the need for change, different judgements about urgency and scope, lack of deep commitment to changes undertaken for aspirational reasons, and ambivalence arising from conversations about the need for change as common reasons why change efforts fail,” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). The CEO and CFO of the company are dispassionate about the “touchy-feely” aspect of communications to put it simply. Presenting the hard data proving the benefits of improved communication efforts will be critical.

While there is no micro management, at least in my area of the organization, it has happened that waning executive involvement brings projects to an early demise, so building and maintaining the “interlevel dynamics of strategy” (p. 100) will be necessary. These will be discussed later in this paper.

A final limitation is that there will be no budget allocation for any formal initiative beyond the minimal amount of committee/cultural funds set aside already for maintaining the organization “culture.”

Action Research

What is useful. Coghlan and Brannick’s five strategic focal points for interlevel dynamics will be extremely useful in this situation. Because the key individuals in the organization that will need to be reminded of the necessity and purpose in an action research project are the creators of content that the five strategies embrace, utilizing these to build support and to keep the initiative within the boundaries of the already-established cultural and organizational foundation will be most beneficial.

1. *Framing the corporate picture.* Formulating action research strategy around the history of the organization, mission statement, etc., and speaking to the fact that the existing leadership are the ones that designed and built the existing framework will keep the project on a solid foundation.

2. *Naming the corporate words.* Connecting the interlevel vocabulary to heighten engagement and ownership of the initiative will help sustain momentum.

3. *Doing corporate analysis.* The cultural predisposition of the majority of senior and mid-level leadership to slide into analytics to validate ongoing initiatives and whether they are succeeding or not, will need to be addressed by acquiring, reviewing, and establishing data-driven motivations for initiating and maintaining action research during the project timeline.

4. *Choosing and implementing corporate actions.* It will be critical to maintain an interface with senior management and executives in order to keep a connection with why an

action research project is critical to maintaining or implementing new corporate actions to prevent the CEO from slipping into old beliefs and practices that could derail a project.

5. Evaluating corporate outcomes. This focus is beneficial in keeping the outcome in sight whether visually, analytically, or through the structure of the project team communications. It will aid senior management in positively reviewing the process, as it may become difficult and laborious at times. Engaging official “reviewers” or “evaluators” at their own level of responsibility and how they will be positively impacted in providing outcomes they are accountable for.

What is *not* useful. Due to the lack of measurable organizational data to support productivity and profitability being directly impacted by communications that improve employee morale, engagement, and retention, a heavy reliance on empirical methodology will not be as helpful in this initiative. Although every effort should be made to establish statistical validation of such in order to gain approvals for the project.

Making it Last

“Action research is about undertaking action and studying that action as it takes place. It is about improving practice through intervention and demands rigorous preparation, planning, action, attention to process, reflection, re-planning and validating claims to learning and theory generation” (Coghlan & Brannick, p. 177).

For an action research project to succeed in this organization, the preliminary project plan and communication of that plan to the executive leadership **MUST** solidly and clearly establish a do-or-die scenario in order to garner a commitment to the length of the project. Without this, it is highly likely the action research project will not survive the project, or even get off the ground.

The ultimate results of a formal communication action research project would profoundly alter the awareness, if not basic functions, of how this organizations speaks its beliefs, communicates to its constituents, and maintains honest and authentic dialogue that will benefit them in the long run.

References

Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2014). *Doing action research in your own organization*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.