

# Effective Communications: A Strategy

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This research is the first in a series on effective executive communications. It presents a framework for effective communications and discusses how effective CIOs build their communication skills. Future publications will discuss how to develop a communications plan and how to develop messages for communications stakeholders. Then, a series of publications will be dedicated to addressing how to conduct specific communication types, such as IT updates and communicating IT performance.

Gartner foundational research is reviewed periodically for accuracy. This document was last reviewed on 7 December 2015.

## Key Findings

- To deliver a great IT communication, CIOs and other IT executives must build an effective communications core, which consists of a communications strategy, a communications plan and delivery skills.
- It pays to invest in effective communications. A Watson Wyatt return on investment (ROI) study on effective communications found a correlation between communications effectiveness, organizational turnover and financial performance.
- There is more pressure on IT leaders to speak the language of the business to translate technology and process changes into everyday terms.

## Recommendations

- Develop a commitment to effective communications.
- Take a holistic approach to developing the communications strategy. Have a clear message, and then work to adjust the message regularly to achieve maximum effectiveness.

- Effective communications is a core leadership competency for the organization, and some level of proficiency should be required at all levels of management. Adopt a strategy for communications, and engage your organization in developing this skill.

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## Analysis

**Communication:** To communicate is to express oneself in such a way that the message is readily and clearly understood.

The communications core consists of a communications strategy, a comprehensive plan and delivery skills. At the heart of the communications strategy is the vision for linking IT to the business and driving business outcomes. For many organizations, though, a vision simply amounts to a statement or a collection of colorful words that become "shelfware" — a document developed with good intentions at one point in time, but which lacks any credibility as being actionable. Rather, a great vision should inspire the hearts and minds of the people in the organization and be used regularly to drive outcomes across the organization. While the formal definition of "communication" captures the mechanical act of imparting information, it neglects the human elements of inspiring, exciting or calming.

It pays to invest in effective communications. A Watson Wyatt ROI study on effective communications found a correlation between communications effectiveness, organizational turnover and financial performance:

- Organizations with effective communications have a 19% higher market premium than those that do not.
- Their shareholder returns are 57% higher than those of organizations with less-effective communications.

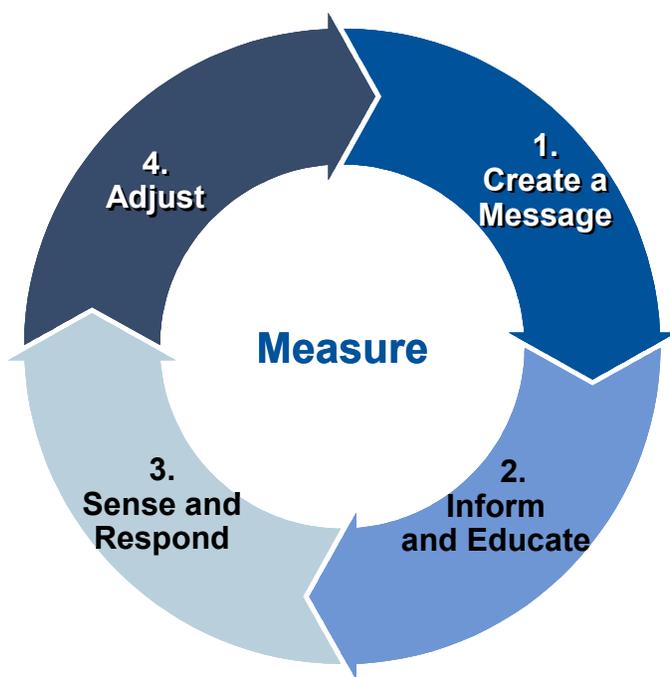
- These organizations are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement than those that communicate less effectively.
- Organizations with highly effective communicators are 20% more likely to report lower turnover rates than those with less-effective communicators.

The project nature of IT work makes effective communications essential. Beyond that, CIOs and IT executives have an opportunity to lead the enterprise to better results through effective communications. Our vision is that CIOs and IT executives use this series to improve IT communications, demonstrate the results to executive peers, and then adapt and share these tools with them to improve the overall enterprise effectiveness.

## 1.0 Components of an Effective Communications Strategy

The need for the business to adopt technology and expand its perceptions of information relevance requires IT leaders to be strong influencers. To meet this need, IT leaders must implement a disciplined approach to communications, illustrated by the strategic framework in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Framework of an Effective Communications Strategy



Source: Gartner (August 2009)

A communications strategy comprises five key actions:

1. *Create a message.* The vision provides the context for delivering any communication. A communication can be good without a clear message; but a great communication links the IT message to business outcomes and reinforces how a person's actions directly contribute to

those results. A great vision tells a story, using the language of the business, to engage the stakeholder audience to listen and act on the message.

"In being able to convey business value, I find it extremely helpful to relate IT in terms our board, the Missouri Department of Transportation commission and our leadership team can understand. So I'm always striving to put the message in an analogy of a transportation system." — Michael Miller, CIO, Missouri Department of Transportation

2. *Inform and educate.* The process of informing and educating stakeholders is considered the "marketing roadshow" aspect of the CIO's job. This process brings the message to life in a way that addresses each type of stakeholder. A great communicator matches the depth and details of the message to specific stakeholders to facilitate learning in a way that is best suited to them.

"If the CIO is a hard-core IT person and talks about widgets, boxes and techie stuff, they aren't using a lexicon the business can understand." — Stephen Warren, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

3. *Sense and respond.* IT professionals do not intend to speak to others in a language that is foreign to them. Yet, at times, that is how IT messages sound. A great communicator reads the audience to see how they are responding as the message is being delivered. If people are nodding their heads in response to the message, asking questions and engaging in conversation, chances are good that they are following along well with the discussion.

"Communicating is about getting agreement on what the direction and priorities for IS are and ensuring that we understand what the key issues and needs in the business are. By accurately understanding these, we avoid confusion." — Owen McCall, CIO, The Warehouse Group

4. *Adjust.* The purpose of communicating is to help recipients internalize what is being said so they can then perform as requested. What people hear and how they internalize a message vary by stakeholder type. How people internalize a message is also influenced by their current level of understanding and experience relative to a particular topic and their culture and life experiences in general. A great communications strategy adjusts for changes along the way. The most powerful message is one that is backed by action — the communicator delivers what is promised, and the communications process is more apt to succeed.

"How you communicate depends on the culture of your organization. We have 800 Ph.D.s here, so our messages require more buy-in and cannot be as top-down as when I was in a technology products company." — Woody Stoeger, CIO, Rand Corporation

5. *Measure.* Measurements are the glue that binds the process of communications. They provide a continual feedback loop throughout the communications cycle to assess effectiveness and opportunities for improvement. Great communications apply a combination of formal and informal methods to help ensure that the message has been effectively received. They also furnish communications with a guide for delivering future messages. Communicating successful results helps engage stakeholders and builds ongoing commitment to the vision.

"Determining the effectiveness of communications is both a matter of measuring what is working and noticing what is not. We conduct online surveys of the faculty and staff to

determine the effectiveness of particular communications. Once a year, we conduct a ranking survey in which we ask people to rank how important something is to them and then how we did on it. This gives us an idea of where we need to improve." — Ronald Bonig, vice president and CIO, The George Washington University

## 2.0 Improve Your Communications Strategy Through an Assessment

Start by engaging your leadership team in a frank conversation about communications. Ask yourself the questions in Figure 2 to determine where you are. For any question to which you answered "No," discuss how to fill that gap, paying particular attention to Questions 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Figure 2. A Communications Strategy Assessment

	Question	Yes	No
1.	Do we recognize that effective communications can impact business results, and are we committed as an organization to improving our communications?		
2.	Does our organization have a strategy for communications, which is institutionalized across the organization?		
3.	Does our communications strategy emphasize the importance of developing clear messages, and does it have a process to ensure the messages developed are clear and appropriate to the communication?		
4.	Does our communications strategy recognize that communications are a fluid process, requiring ongoing interactions with people to help them internalize the message in order for us to achieve our objective?		
5.	Do we adjust our messages regularly in order to help people fully internalize what we are saying?		
6.	Do we measure the results of each communication in order to improve our communications process and the communications we are delivering?		
7.	Do we effectively communicate those messages that we need to, and can we substantiate this claim through either quantitative or qualitative information?		

Source: Gartner (August 2009)

While this self-assessment is a valuable start, what is even more important is the dialogue you are beginning with your leadership team. Effective communication is a core leadership skill, and this initiates the process of developing that skill within your team. Seek to understand what is working relative to communications now and what is not. Ask open-ended questions such as:

- Where are we successful in our communication? How do we know?
- What has made us successful?
- Where are we not successful in our communications? How do we know?
- What did we do wrong?

### 3.0 Develop Your Communication Skills

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Communication is a core leadership competency, which balances speaking, listening and facilitating. In great leaders, these skills come together as they embark upon a journey to impart a message and engage an organization in a dialogue toward a higher purpose. Those sensitive to their audience use what they learn to alter their vision and their message and to engage others as required in the journey.

Phenomenal orators are recognized for their exceptional delivery skills. One can have the best message but not the best delivery and still be great because the message is so compelling. Or one can have a less-than-compelling message and be great at delivery and still win approval — albeit with some skepticism. One can then take the opportunity to hone the message to become great over time. And, finally, there are the majority of individuals who are good communicators with moments of excellence. To increase your communications effectiveness, apply these best practices:

- Establish solid relationships within the enterprise. Don't wait for a crisis to begin communicating. Develop communications channels before you must use them. If you wait for a crisis to start communicating with a stakeholder group, there will be more questions about who you are and what you represent versus the content of the message you're trying to communicate.
- Adjust your communication style to the maturity level and culture of the organization. Does the CEO support the CIO in a leadership role? Do the lines of business support the CIO in a business role? Understanding where the organization is today will help you chart the path to communications effectiveness.
- Adjust the level of message abstraction for the specific audience. At executive levels, a more strategic message is appropriate; at operational levels, a more tactical and concrete message will achieve better results.
- Adopt a fact-based approach to message construction. A message based on facts helps defuse emotion and encourages objectivity.
- Develop an industry story that brings the IT vision to life. A relevant industry story will help engage your stakeholders in a conversation and help them internalize messages.
- Develop your own communication style. To develop your skills, take speaking classes, consult a communications coach and participate in programs such as Toastmasters International. Look for opportunities to practice and refine your skills by presenting everywhere you can — for example, at business conferences or at your church or child's school.
- Make it personal. Weave in personal stories and experiences to demonstrate business points, while making them more engaging and memorable. Further, communicating in a way that people can relate to will help gain their buy-in for the message.
- Invest the time upfront to prepare for every communication interaction to ensure greater success: practice, practice, practice.

Spend time with your leadership team and assess the communication strengths within your organization by answering the following questions:

- Who are our best communicators?
- What do they do that is effective?
- Where do we need to build communications skills on our team?
- What formal and informal venues will we use to build those skills among the team?

#### 4.0 Effective Communications: An Example

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In an ideal world, executives have complete control over the messages they are communicating, but, often, the unexpected happens. The investment and preparation in communications pay off at these times. In the case study that follows, we see this and the principles we've discussed at play.

Owen McCall is the CIO of The Warehouse Group in New Zealand, and his company provides him a communications coach. Recently, he was asked to deliver the close for a strategy and leadership meeting because his boss had to leave the meeting early. Unfamiliar with the dynamics of the group, he chose to close the meeting with a leadership story instead of a summary:

We were on holiday as a family and went to Franz Josef Glacier down on the South Island of New Zealand. As you walk along the glacier, you've got the glacial river, and it's very, very rocky.

And the first thing my son Ryan, who's five, did when he saw the rock was to run up to it, climb up on top and jump off. Because that's what five-year-old boys do.

Then, he found another rock and climbed up on it and jumped off. Meanwhile, the rest of the family trekked down toward the glacial terminal, and I hung back with Ryan. And he climbed up on the rocks and jumped off, and he climbed up on the rocks and jumped off. Eventually, I said, "Look, Ryan, you need to stop climbing up on rocks and jumping off because we need to go over where the rest of the family is — because this is what we're doing; we're going to the terminal of the glacier."

So I grabbed his hand and started walking toward the rest of the group. And as five-year-old boys do, they get very tired, very quickly when they're not doing what they want. So he got very tired, very quickly and started with, "Dad, carry me, carry me."

I figured out that what I needed to do was not stop him from jumping on rocks but get him to jump on the rocks along the trek. So I said, "Ryan, see how many rocks you can jump on between here and that next post." And so he'd run away, jump on the rocks and jump off. We did that all the way there and all the way back. He had a great time, and he had lots and lots of energy; it was awesome.

I told that story at the leadership meeting, and I said, "You know, I started thinking about that afterwards and about what that means for us in business. Too often as leaders, we kill people's passions. We kill the passion by saying, 'Stop jumping off the rocks; you need to go this way; come and do this.' Whereas, perhaps a better approach is to guide people's passions. Don't stop them from climbing and jumping off rocks, but get them to climb and jump off rocks in the right direction. Let's stop killing people's passions and harness those passions instead."

It pays to invest in effective communications. Our next publication will discuss how to further develop the communications core by developing a communications plan. It will be followed by a publication about understanding your communications stakeholders.

## Recommended Reading

- "Toolkit: How to Create a One-Page IT Strategy"
- "Effective Communications: Stakeholder Analysis"
- "A Practical Guide to Stakeholder Management"
- "Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Plan"
- "Effective Communications: IT Strategy"
- "Effective Communications: Lead Through Storytelling"
- "Effective Communications: Performance Dashboards"
- "Effective Communications: Policies"
- "Effective Communications: IT Satisfaction Surveys"
- "Effective Communications: IT Updates"
- "Effective Communications: Difficult Communications"
- "Creating the Communications Core: The CIO's Guide to Effective Communications"
- "CIO Checklist for Leadership Development"
- "Communication Excellence Depends on Understanding Context: Take This Test"

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