

Effective Communications: Difficult Communications

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This is a continuation of Gartner's series about effective communications. The first publications explored a strategy for effective communications and provided tools to analyze stakeholders in communications and create a communications plan; the remaining research explored specific types of communications. This research discusses how to approach difficult communications.

Gartner foundational research is reviewed periodically for accuracy. This document was last reviewed on 8 July 2015.

Key Findings

- Great communication inspires action and commitment and drives business outcomes.
- When CIOs effectively deliver difficult communications, they help build commitment to, trust in, and respect and credibility for IT.
- The context for delivering difficult communications is always the business strategy.

Recommendations

- Define a clear plan for difficult communications.
- Develop a process for difficult communications well in advance of the difficulty itself.
- Work closely with stakeholders in these types of communications to continually improve the process.

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Analysis

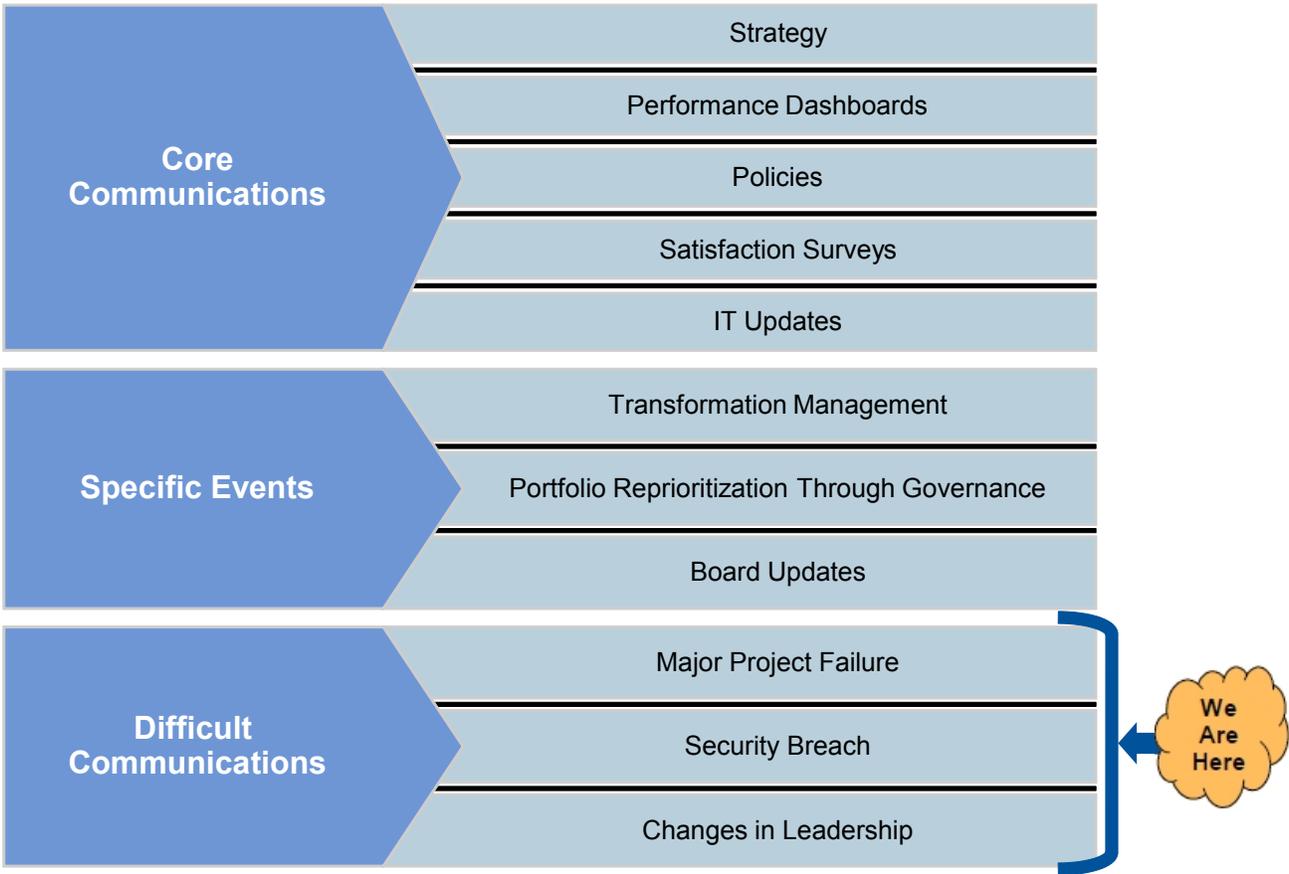
"People understand you can't release certain types of information, but they also understand there is a lot of information you can share. If you never talk about it, it looks like you're operating in a vacuum and hiding — or worse, don't even know about the issue. People won't have any confidence in your knowledge of problems and operational strategies if you

don't communicate." — Thomas Birch, speaking as technical assistant to the CIO, Intel

As a CIO, you do not plan to have problem situations, requiring communications to prevent or defuse from becoming a crisis. However, should such situations arise, speed and clarity of message are critical but conflicting elements. Being proactive is the key to successfully preventing or defusing a potential crisis. To be proactive, the CIO must be prepared and acknowledge when a problem situation arises, research the facts, craft the message and deliver it in such a way as to achieve the desired actions.

While the IT portfolio of communications types varies from organization to organization, Gartner Executive Programs has found common examples of such difficult communications among the organizations of member CIOs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. IT Communications Portfolio



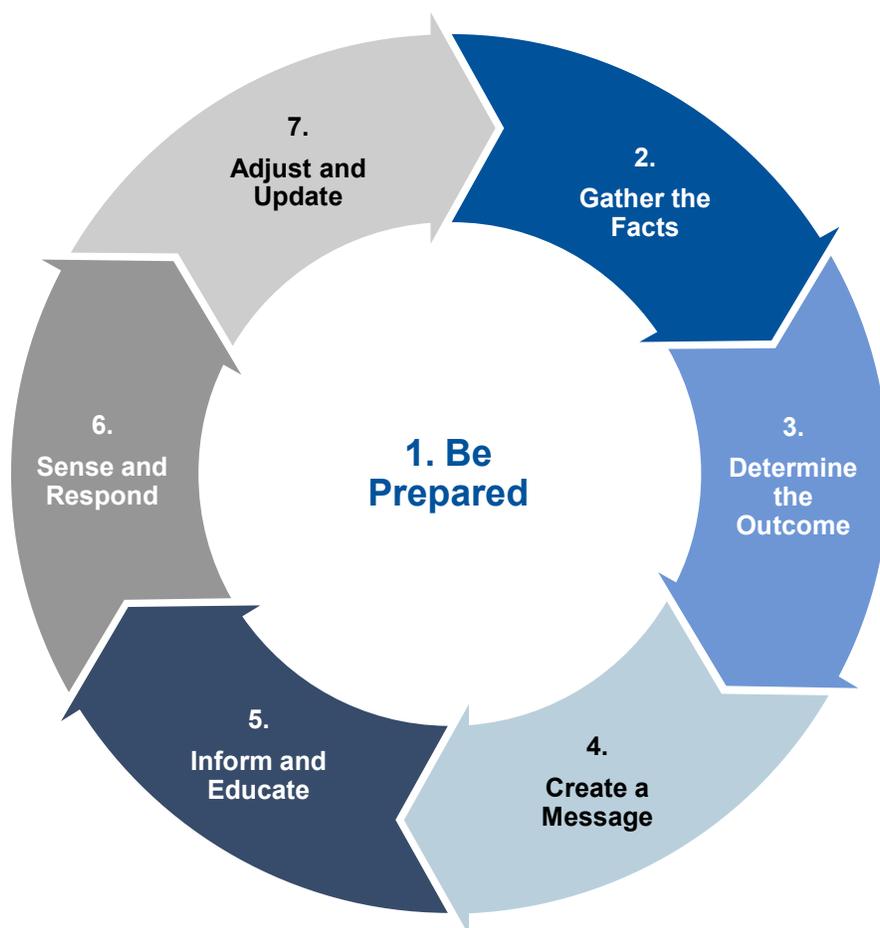
Source: Gartner (May 2011)

1.0 Components of Difficult Communications

"(We) take a problem management approach to get an understanding of what occurred. But for communication purposes, we need to be concise in delivering our message to keep us from getting lost in the weeds. We provide enough detail for them to draw the conclusions themselves." — Beth Apillanes, director of strategy and programs, RAND Corporation

Difficult communications is one of the three major sets of the CIO's communications strategy (see Figure 1). They provide an opportunity to inform and, more importantly, replace fear, uncertainty and doubt with constructive, forward-looking action. When delivered effectively, difficult communications enable the CIO to build trust, engender commitment to creating a positive outcome from the crisis, and further linking IT with the business and business outcomes. Creating and delivering difficult communications quickly and succinctly require a disciplined approach, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Process for Difficult Communications



Source: Gartner (May 2011)

The difficult communications process spans seven key actions described below.

1.1 Be Prepared

When situations occur, quick and accurate communications must reach all the affected parties. Rather than spend time sorting through who should be notified, prepare distribution lists beforehand for each type of difficult communication: project failure, security breach and leadership change. Include the relevant senior leadership, business staff, IT staff, PR/marketing and other affected stakeholders, and determine the channels for distributing the communications type to them (see "Effective Communications: Stakeholder Analysis").

Create templates for the types of communications that include sections for what occurred, how it might impact people in the different audiences, why they should care, what they might need, what you need them to do and your follow-up communications plan.

"The operations guide provides procedures for every type of communication we deliver — both under normal conditions and in case of serious service disruptions. The guide contains templates, so people do not have to reinvent the wheel every time and can focus on the message they want to convey." — Christine d'Arc Taylor, communications manager of information services and technology, RAND Corporation

1.2 Gather the Facts

Having a good grasp of the situation and the associated basic and important facts is the basis for determining what and how to communicate and to whom. How quickly you need to quell people's fears determines the amount of time you have to collect and analyze facts. Contacting the responsible, accountable, consulted and informed (RACI) individuals will help you establish what is known and what you need to do about it.

1.3 Determine the Outcome

Based on the nature of the event, determine what you want to occur as a result of your communications. Is it strictly to inform, actively allay fears or lead people to action? Difficult communications are predominantly about influencing, and they focus on the human elements of calming, inspiring or exciting. For example, communicating a major project failure is about informing people of what has occurred and its potential impact, as well as inspiring them to positive action.

1.4 Create a Message

With your event distribution lists in mind, focus on your audiences and your template to create a clear, easy-to-understand and custom-made message. Include sufficient detail to describe the situation, acknowledging if there are things you may not be able to discuss at the current time. Discuss the real and potential impacts on your audiences. Address what you think may be their fears, uncertainties and doubts. Help them assume control and responsibility by telling them what you need them to do and the challenge in which they need to engage. Encourage self-reflection, and provide a means of asking questions or providing input. Be positive, and provide an uplifting ending.

1.5 Inform and Educate

To gain the attention and commitment of each of your audiences, adjust the depth and details of the message to suit each group. A great communicator considers the corporate culture and characteristics when crafting the message and selecting how it will be delivered to a particular audience. Selecting the right delivery method or channel is key to demonstrating consideration for

the roles of the stakeholders, successfully drawing their attention and engaging them to act on the message.

1.6 Sense and Respond

Communication is a bidirectional activity. Use a combination of formal and informal methods to ensure your message has been effectively received and to get a sense of people's reaction to the event and their level of discomfort. Swiftly follow up with stakeholders to shift negative comments into positive actions.

1.7 Adjust and Update

As the event continues to unfold and then wind down, modify your follow-up communications plan to provide updates. Adjust your approach to the message as needed to help everyone stay positive and productive. Consider using obviously relevant stories because they help reduce stress and let people understand the problem better.

Before the event is completely in the past and your attention diverts to other pressing issues, evaluate the effectiveness of your communications. Adjust your distribution lists and templates as needed. Annotate the templates with reminders of what was especially effective and what you want to improve, should a similar event arise.

2.0 Communications Plan for Difficult Communications

"When you can have a professional discussion about an issue and talk through what needs to be done to resolve it, the communications strategy is working. If conversations are about substantive issues that are forward-looking and deal with facts, rather than innuendo and anecdote, then you've succeeded and are making progress." — Stephen Warren, principal deputy assistant secretary for information and technology, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The communications plan is designed to support the delivery of a difficult communication to affected audiences. Formalizing a communications plan helps focus communications and create consistent messaging. Communications plan components were introduced in "Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Plan." See Figure 3 for the components of a sample communications plan.

Figure 3. Components of a Communications Plan

Communications Plan

Communications Type	Purpose	Communi-cator	Stakeholders	Messages	Delivery Method	Delivery Frequency	Feedback	Measures of Success

Source: Gartner (May 2011)

Communications plan components for delivering difficult communications are specialized for each of the three types, as discussed in the following sections.

2.1 Major Project Failure: Learn the Facts, and Tell the Truth

Project failure can and does happen, and it is not a pleasant situation for the CIO and the IT team. Some CIOs step into the position after a predecessor's major project failure — for example, an effort that didn't deliver the desired benefits, achieve the strategic advantage envisioned or effectively manage the associated risks.

Consider the following communications plan components in addressing a major project failure:

- **Purpose.** If you are a new CIO coming into the enterprise with a failure already on the table, the goal is to address the reasons for the failure and restore the credibility of the IT organization — as quickly as possible. The same applies to a CIO who still has the political capital to correct the situation.
- **Communicator.** The message should come from the CIO. However, the project management office (PMO) and the project manager or application director responsible for the project may play a role in helping develop the message. Relationship managers can assist in communicating the message.
- **Stakeholder targets.** The key stakeholders are your boss, first, followed by the project sponsor and, ultimately, the governance committee, as defined by the organization. After the dust settles, debrief the IT organization via an IT update (see "Effective Communications: IT Updates").
- **Message content.** Learn and communicate what the issues were, and clearly articulate what is different. Review options, and develop a recommendation. Tie the recommendations back to the business and IT strategies to demonstrate how and why a path forward makes sense.

Tell the truth, and accept the blame. The worst thing a CIO can do in this kind of situation is to not be honest, because eventually, any deception will be discovered and hurt the CIO more than

the initial failure does. The second worst thing is to try to blame someone else. Let the CEO determine who is to blame and what actions are appropriate. He or she will do so, anyway.

- **Delivery method.** Face-to-face delivery is best. If there is time to get on a plane and visit in person, do it. In addition, apply the standard project process to consider the options available, and move forward with a decision. This is the one time where it may be acceptable to ignore the personal preferences of others when communicating — if this is a critical issue, you will earn more credibility by responding and engaging the appropriate people immediately.
- **Delivery frequency.** Deliver the message as soon as the facts are collected and you understand what happened. Respond to stakeholder issues and fears with communications designed to acknowledge their reactions and convert them to positive action. Provide updates on the remediation plan, acknowledging any negative aspects and highlighting the positive. As the remediation plan gets under way, daily or every couple of days, update communications. If you demonstrate commitment, people are more likely to suspend judgment and give you an opportunity to effectively bring the event to a conclusion.
- **Feedback.** Gather feedback by consulting with your manager and the executive sponsor, and then engage them in developing a path forward.
- **Measures of success.** The ultimate measure of success is zero loss of credibility for the IT organization. If this cannot be achieved, however, the leadership skills demonstrated during this time — as measured by sincerity and understanding the facts — will go a long way toward paving a successful future path.

2.2 Security Breach: Don't Go It Alone

A security breach is a failure in the perimeter of the virtual organization, which can pose a significant threat to business operations and customers.

Consider the following communications plan components in addressing a security breach:

- **Purpose.** The goal should be to quickly engage resources across the enterprise and to determine and communicate what has happened, the extent of the issue, and what is being done to resolve it and prevent it from happening again.
- **Communicator.** The CIO should initiate the communications process, assisted by other IT executives, relationship managers and the service desk (for regular alerts).
- **Stakeholder targets.** Immediately engage others throughout the organization, starting with your boss, followed by corporate communications. Next, reach out to legal, HR and the CEO, as appropriate. Effectiveness at this level requires learning how to use all the available corporate resources to address the issue at hand. In the case of a security breach — especially one that impacts customers, consider forming a rapid-response "SWAT team" of key individuals responsible for following the event from end to end for the duration of the crisis (see Figure 4). By creating this team in advance of a crisis (Step 1 in Figure 2) and creating agreements for rapid message development, review and delivery, a quicker response will be enabled, should such an event occur. A team approach to communications can help speed problem resolution

and prevent the breach from recurring. After delivering initial internal communications, notify the impacted vendors and customers.

Figure 4. Members of the SWAT Team

Create a SWAT team for quick action during a security breach

Role	Purpose
CIO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alert everyone of the situation. Engage the appropriate stakeholders. Monitor progress. Report status according to a defined process.
Corporate Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure messages according to stakeholder groups. Determine the best approach for publishing messages to each group.
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the breach from a legal perspective. Recommend messages to corporate communications. Review all messages for legal accuracy and risk.
HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the breach from an HR perspective. Recommend messages to corporate communications. Review all messages prior to publication.
CEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide advice and counsel throughout the process. Contact customers or key vendors as part of the communications process (optional).
Executive Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay aware of the situation. Contact customers or key vendors as part of the communications process (optional).

Source: Gartner (May 2011)

- Message content.** The messages should communicate the facts, including what happened, why, and what has been done or is being done to prevent future breaches. Thus, it is important to quickly determine what happened and why, and then consider all forms of communication. For example, if customers are impacted, a notice on your website with a personal follow-up by executives to the largest customers may be appropriate. Stick to the facts about what has happened, what the potential impact is, what the enterprise is doing about it, and other pertinent information around when the issue will be resolved or when the next communication can be expected.
- Delivery method.** To the extent possible, deliver the message in person to executive stakeholders. Whether to call or visit middle management depends on the severity of the situation: The more severe the situation is, the better it is to deliver the message in person.
- Delivery frequency.** Deliver communications as soon as the breach is detected and at regular intervals throughout the resolution of the problem.
- Feedback.** Immediately following the event, hold a debriefing session to document all the factors around the breach, including what happened, when, why, what is being done to avoid a recurrence, and the extent of the damage — such as revenue loss and impact to the company brand. Roll up the results to a performance dashboard.

- **Measures of success.** For breaches that impact customers, the ideal result is that the actions taken enhance the credibility of the company and the IT organization.

2.3 Changes in Leadership

Leadership changes over time. However, similar to feelings about a merger or acquisition, people can feel uncomfortable about what will happen when new leadership takes the helm. Fear of the unknown can take a terrible toll on organizational productivity.

Consider the following communications plan components in addressing changes in leadership:

- **Purpose.** The goal should be to announce new leadership in a way that answers questions, creates a compelling vision for the organization and motivates the staff to engage in that vision.
- **Communicator.** The message about the change should first be delivered by the managing executive over the area where leadership has changed. For example, if the CIO has changed, the person to whom the CIO reports (the CEO, CFO or COO) should frame the message, followed immediately by the CIO. If, however, an IT leader has changed, the CIO should deliver the message, and the new IT leadership should then talk to the staff.
- **Stakeholder targets.** These include the IT organization and executive leadership of the enterprise.
- **Message content.** The key messages to deliver:
 - What has changed?
 - Why?
 - What does it mean for me personally and for the organization?
 - What do you expect me to do in light of the change?
 - What can I and the organization expect next?

Although it might not be possible to walk into these initial meetings with a new vision in hand, the head of the organization can reassure the organization with a quick demonstration of leadership. If an IT strategy or one-page vision for the organization has not been developed, the CIO can focus on helping paint an optimistic picture of the future at a more general level. For instance, "We will become a world-class IT organization by 2013, helping the enterprise grow by 10% year over year." If you know why the previous leadership didn't work out, use this information to start creating a vision of the organization that is different from before.

- **Delivery method.** The message is best delivered in person via an IT update (see "Effective Communications: IT Updates").
- **Delivery frequency.** Communicate the change as quickly as possible. Follow up with updates as soon as the vision and strategy coalesce. Respond to stakeholder issues and fears with communications designed to acknowledge their reactions and convert them to positive action.

- **Feedback.** Opportunities for gathering feedback are during the initial announcement meeting and via individual departmental updates.
- **Measures of success.** Success is when the IT organization quickly adjusts to the change and continues to perform as before — or better.

3.0 Nuances of Delivering Difficult Communications

As with any communication, but especially the difficult ones, do not waste the audience's time — be direct, concise and clear. Communicate empathy and sincerity, and be genuine. Make sure your information is timely, relevant, important and comprehensible (TRIC).

Information passes the TRIC test if you can answer "yes" to four questions:

- Is the information *timely*?
 - Did the issue arise recently?
 - Is the issue ongoing?
 - Does the issue need to be addressed soon?
- Is the information *relevant*?
 - Is the audience impacted by the event?
 - Can the audience members address the issue?
 - Is the issue presented in the right context?
- Is the information *important*?
 - How important is the issue?
 - How important is the issue compared with other active issues?
- Is the information *comprehensible*?
 - Does the audience have the necessary background?
 - Have you provided the necessary explanatory information?
 - Have you mixed data and interpretation that might confuse the audience?
 - Are feasible and effective actions identified?

When a company is going through a difficult time, the CIO is responsible for framing the difficulties within the overall vision of the enterprise and the IT organization and must answer the staff question, "What does this mean to me?" By framing how staff should interpret changes, the CIO helps the organization feel reassured about its future — and further builds up dedication and commitment.

4.0 Communications in Action for Difficult Communications

When Adam Frumkin, the CIO of the School Employees Retirement System of Ohio, assumed his role, he quickly assembled his IT team and delivered the message, "Everything you know is about to change." He then used that meeting to engage his employees in the change process: "If you are clear in communicating your vision and direction, then you are leading and not just managing people. People will want to be part of your vision and help you move it forward. Transparent communications are important in making sure everybody understands what you're doing and why — whether you are communicating up, down or across. You want them to leave with fewer questions than they had and to answer their questions before they ask."

In smaller enterprises, CIOs tend to be the primary communicator for the IT organization. As the enterprise grows in size and complexity, some IT organizations hire a communications specialist or communications manager.

Communicating effectively is a core leadership skill. Great communications are a complex symphony of vision, message content and message delivery. Success is measured formally and informally; it requires understanding who you are talking to and how well your audiences are internalizing the message. Becoming a great communicator requires practice, practice, practice — so develop your skills and use every opportunity to practice them.

Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

- "Toolkit: How to Create a One-Page IT Strategy"
- "Effective Communications: A 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"

"Creating the Communications Core: The CIO's Guide to Effective Communications"

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