ENGINEERING AND IMPLEMENTING AN EXECUTIVE-LEVEL COMMUNICATION PLAN IN A GLOBAL PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY

BRIDGETTE LIPMAN*
MARY Z. ASHLOCK, PhD**

ABSTRACT
Communication within organizations in a global environment requires effective internal and strategic planning at the executive level. Previous studies indicate that measurement is a key factor in assessing the needs and success of global communication within an organization. Survey questions were used to measure satisfaction responses from 650 local and 110 global employees in a technology division of a large manufacturing company. In this case study, employees expressed the need to connect team members through face-to-face meetings, employee webcast meetings, web chat forums, and an updated employee networking site. The findings formed the foundations for recommendations for strategy, objectives, and tactics within the organization.

Keywords: Communication, Global, Organization, Strategic

INTRODUCTION
Effective executive-level communication has a long history with origins in rhetoric and business practices (Reinsch, 1996). In current times, one of the most notable organizational theorists, Chester Barnard, note that “[t]he first function of the executive is to develop and maintain a system of communication” (Barnard, 1938, p. 256). This field of study was expanding as Angrist (1953) measured the frequency and value with which 273 business executives used various communication strategies. The implications were that successful business executives used various communication strategies. The implications were that successful business executives need to make sure that orders, plans, policies, and agreements were clearly understood by employees. Angrist’s study showed that systematic information could be used to train executives in business communication skills. In the next phase of research, Bennett (1971) explored business

* Department of Communication, #310 Strickler Hall, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky 40292 USA, BridgetteLipman@yahoo.com
** Department of Communication, #310 Strickler Hall, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky 40292 USA, maryz.ashlock@louisville.edu
managers’ preparation for becoming corporate communicators. The survey of executives revealed that a “majority of the vice-presidents responding to the questionnaire believed that a formal course in business communication is needed for adequate preparation for management positions” (p. 9), although only 69% of the executives, all of California-based Fortune 500 companies, had taken a formal course. Communicators learned that “the ability to communicate effectively is extremely important to businessmen and this ability plays a significant part in moving to top management positions” (p. 10). Therefore, many of the managers and executives in these positions either obtained formal training, or recognized the importance of such.

By 1978, communication was still simply a side note, as demonstrated in a study by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC; Williams, 1978). Executives in the United States and Canada “doubt[ed] that communication should (or could) be formalized” (p. 6). Top executives at some these countries’ largest corporations were interviewed regarding several communication-related topics. It was found that employee communication was rated as “extremely important” by most chief executive officers (CEOs). The reasons these managers ranked communication as highly as they did included 1) the success of future products depending on employee’s understanding, 2) the correlation between employee communication and profits, and 3) change within the organisation. What becomes clear from Williams’s (1978) research is that, in the late 1970s, communication was beginning to stand out as a priority, but the executives implementing the plans did not feel they had the tools to be successful.

Yet, surveys conducted for a consortium of manufacturing companies indicated a 13% growth in managerial communication positions in a single year (Harris & Bryant, 1986). The value of communication was apparently making its way up the ladder within corporations. Executives began seeking knowledge on effective downward communication to employees and the impact on overall job performance. As noted by Anderson and Level (1980), “[m]anagement should employ a managerial style that recognizes these differences. Supervisors should be aware of the potential problems that can develop because of an inappropriate communication system; and, just as leadership styles should fit the situation, so should a communication system (p. 58). Bennett and Olney (1986) conducted research in the 1980s to determine whether effective communication skills were important for executive success. The researchers surveyed executives in select Fortune 500 companies in the United States. Executives stated that the skill areas of interpersonal, written, and oral communication were critical to the executives in their present positions. On the other hand, the most serious communication problems identified by executives were a lack of clarity, poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and poor speaking ability. The executives’ consensus was that effective communication skills were more important than ever before and these skills would continue to be a critical component of the information society:
Our firm has found in a lot of leadership that CEOs have just not had the opportunity, because of present business, to think about how they can be visible to make their leadership skills more apparent. And credibility has a direct relationship to visibility. When we've looked at organizations that have high communication profiles and good ratings in a number of dimensions around communication, we find that they found ways to make the leadership visible. (Moore, 1996, p. 18)

Horton (1991) created a tool that corporate communicators could use to determine their position within the organisation. According to this scale, there are four positions one can hold: leader, counsellor, implementer, and outsider. The scale instructs users to complete the questionnaire and self-assess their skills and involvement. An example of the questions posed is: “Are you involved in developing the plans for issues and/or crises at your company?” The survey is designed to identify the role each communicator plays in communication management within the organisation, and answers the question: “How am I doing?” Geddie (1995, p. 8) also found telling comments in a survey of executives in and around Dallas, Texas. They recommended, “[c]ommunicating through a shared voice. In all communication, both internal and external, articulating our company personality in the same way. Develop a corporate strategy which defines what the corporate voice should be and how it should be used in each type of communication." The executives also recommended, “[c]ommunicating timely, relevant information to a highly functional, diverse, and geographically scattered work force by keeping closer tabs on current issues and challenges facing our operations.”

By 2005, internal communications had become part of management strategy, and was seen as a significant contributor to employee motivation. The relationship between supervisors and employees had advanced, and communications, especially in times of organisational change, was made a priority. Richard Dolphin’s (2005) article, “Internal Communications: Today’s Strategic Imperative”, consists of unstructured interviews from a small sampling of industry and public service organisations. The critical difference observed from this study is that internal communications was beginning to focus on relationship building rather than just distributing information. Researchers also need to remember that team members separated by time, distance, and/or culture often struggle with issues of trust, conflict, and potentially divisive subgroups. Now that global virtual teams are becoming increasingly common in organisations, it is important to understand how to minimize such interactional difficulties (Scott, 2013).

The perception of communication managers within an organisation as experts who are able to give valuable advice and enable others is crucial for building a strong identity as communication experts (Zerfass & Franke, 2013). Having the opportunity to observe a corporate team and the formation of an executive-level plan helps to further develop our understanding of communication strategies. Thus, this study focused on a single organisation and asked two research questions:

RQ1: What communication strategy do executives use to be effective with global teams?
RQ2: What communication tactics do executives use to be effective with global teams?
Method
This study looked at one particular global manufacturing company in order to gain an understanding of how executives created an effective communication plan with employees working in global teams. The feedback from employee satisfaction surveys distributed every two years regarding the executive who oversees 760 global employees has been positive. In particular, the global employees have been identified by the organisation as being productive while delivering quality products to customers.

Research Setting
The organisation is Seneca Tech (pseudonym), a large U.S. multinational corporation with 760 employees. Of those employees, 650 are located in the United States, and where the senior vice president is located. The company has a highly educated, self-motivated workforce in this technology division and the organisation’s goal is to keep top talent and minimize attrition. The new corporate culture is introducing the use of global teams among new and tenured employees. Access for the research was gained by permission from a senior vice president.

Participants
A significant number of the employees are new to the organisation. Four percent of employees have been with the company for less than a year and 23% of the employees have been with the company for fewer than two years. The goal is for the teams to feel more connected with one another and with the senior vice president.

Data Collection
To gain an understanding of how the senior vice president engineers and implements a communication plan within a global environment, this study combines observation with interviews, followed by a thematic analysis. The combination of observations and interviews allows the researchers to verify and validate the data that has been collected (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Observation. We observed the senior vice president in several meetings with the upper-management staff to discuss the status of the global teams. At first, there was no plan in place to meet the goal of making the team feel more connected. The preferred method of communicating with employees was face-to-face meetings. However, roundtable discussions with team members were irregular and unproductive. Quarterly meetings were discussed as a way to better communicate with the teams and the need for scheduling was identified. At the time, there was also no regular contact from the executive with the 110 global employees, although, occasional patent awards and yearly recognition was taking place. Managers were visible every day or every other day locally. The other global visits to team member sites by managers would perhaps occur once a year.

Interviews. Following the team observations and an initial analysis of the data gathered during the upper-management staff meetings, we interviewed the senior vice president, an upper-management staff member, and five team members from the United States. After taking notes on responses to semi-structured, open-ended
questions, some adjustments were made to the executive-level communication plan based upon staff members’ questions: Are regular roundtables attainable? What should be reported in all employee meetings? Who will listen? Will they care? Can we measure this? Will this make a difference?

Management Satisfaction Survey. The upper-management staff shared their survey results from two years prior to the executive communication plan and then the staff conducted the survey again six months after the new executive communication plan was in place.

**Data Analysis**
The data were collected from the observations of the upper-management staff team, and interviews with the senior vice president, an upper-management staff member, and five team members from the United States. The researchers used thematic analysis to identify recurring or common themes from the observations and the interviews (Green & Thorogood, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Broad themes emerged and the researchers identified and coded them. The themes were further analysed and organised into patterns. The researchers reviewed the data and provided triangulation of the findings to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

**Research Findings**
RQ1 asked what communication strategy executives use to be effective with global teams. The observed planning meeting involving the senior vice president and the upper-management staff used a strategy based upon a prior management survey and feedback from employees. Arnold (1988) suggests that corporate communicators develop a strategic plan directly linked to the long- and short-term goals of the business plan. Table 1 shows the strategy was to use a variety of communication tools and consistent messaging to engage employees at every location. The seven objectives are: the need to connect the team; increase visibility to employees and vice versa; retain top talent; drive goals and objectives; encourage best practice sharing; recognize and award employees; and expand methods for reporting concerns. The tactics are outlined in Table 1 and are discussed further in Table 2.
Table 1 Executive-level Communication Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use a variety of communication tools and consistent messaging to engage employees at every level of the function and in every location.</td>
<td>Connect the team</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase visibility to employees</td>
<td>Round table discussions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retain top talent</td>
<td>All employee meetings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drive goals and objectives</td>
<td>Web chat</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage best practice sharing</td>
<td>Quarterly email message/postings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognize and award employees</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Expand methods for reporting concerns</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

RQ2 asked what communication tactics executives use to be effective with global teams. Arnold (1988) advocates communication tactics that can be quantified and evaluated in terms of business results: “Be accountable for achieving business objectives, not just the successful execution of communication tactics” (Arnold, 1988, p. 12). In addition, what decision makers really want to know are supported arguments, figures, and benchmarks, but that is lacking in communication strategies. Tactics need to be clear, quantifiable, and demonstrable (Van der Jagt, 2005). The observed planning meeting involving the senior vice president and the upper-management staff contained five tactics based upon a prior management survey and feedback from employees. The first tactic, Face to Face, refers to a senior vice president casually connecting with employees one on one, and maintaining an open flow of communication. This involves all employees for the monthly walk-abouts where the senior vice president walks through team members’ work environments while stopping to interact. In addition, the senior vice president visits other company global locations as travel allows. Mishra, Boynton, and Mishra (2014) support this because their research shows executives and employees believe that face-to-face communication between an employee and his or her manager was the most effective channel. Furthermore, these executives found that face-to-face communication reduced turnover and promoted a sense of community among employees.

Second, “roundtables” refer to the way in which a senior vice president can provide two-way communication opportunities with employees selected by Human Resources on a bimonthly basis. Attendees have opportunities to submit topics and questions for
the discussion. Third, the employee meeting/webcast is an opportunity for the senior vice president to connect with employees, share key messages, and recognize achievements. The audience is comprised of all local employees and the webcast is offered to the employees biannually. Fourth, the web chat forum provides an open, anonymous forum for employees to ask questions and includes all global employees. The final tactic is an email/employee networking site that allows all global employees to update other employees of progress on goals and objectives. The measurements are outlined as well.

**Table 2 Results of Tactics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>Casually connect with employees and maintain open flow of communication</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>Monthly walk-abouts, and as travel allows to global locations</td>
<td>Hours spent on walk-abouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round table discussions</td>
<td>Provide two-way communication opportunities</td>
<td>Employees selected by Human Resources Department</td>
<td>Bi-monthly</td>
<td>Number of attendees, topics reviewed and questions submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All employee meeting webcast</td>
<td>Connect employees and share key messages and recognize achievements</td>
<td>All local employees and webcast to extended team</td>
<td>Bi-annually</td>
<td>Number of employee attendees and watching webcast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web chat forum</td>
<td>Provide open, anonymous forum for employees to ask questions</td>
<td>All global employees</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>Number of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email / employee networking site</td>
<td>Update and inform employees of progress towards goals and objectives</td>
<td>All global employees</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>Number of emails, postings, and followers</td>
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</table>

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, employees were more satisfied with the senior vice president. These findings support the research done by Men (2014), who found that executives’ use of face-to-face channels is positively associated with employee satisfaction. For example,
employees prefer emails when receiving information from the organisation regarding
decisions, policies, events, or changes, followed by general employee meetings and
interpersonal communication with managers. Effective executive communication skills
are critical. Robles (2012) identified the top 10 interpersonal skills as perceived the
most important by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy,
responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and
work ethic.

In the present study, team members felt more knowledgeable about the company
and new employees were better integrated into the corporation as shown in Geddie's
(1995) earlier study in which employees' demands on senior executives were taken
into account. Topics employees wish to hear about from their CEO include the future
of the organisation, overall corporate strategy, major changes, and feedback. Some
aspects of the plan in this study remained in place within a year of implementation.
For example, the web chats continued because team members appreciated the
anonymity. The employee networking site was also considered highly successful even
after a long implementation. As Lindeborg states, “[c]hief executives said the return on
investment of their communication function was 184%, or nearly two dollars for every
dollar spent” (Lindeborg, 1994, p. 11).

However, the employee webcast biannual meeting was discontinued because the
senior vice president felt uncomfortable with the video. Perhaps this is related to what
Gray and Robertson (2005) suggest that the communication tactics we use need to be
effective in genuinely connecting with others. For example, global travel, intranet,
email, video streaming, and newsletters can be used to support face-to-face
communication with executives. A key point is that the media efforts should develop
relationships, not simply convey information. In addition, Morgan, Paucar-Caceres, and
Wright (2014) caution that within the global virtual team, a lack of consistent and
routine communication can create a high level of misunderstanding and
misinterpretation.

The purpose of this study was to identify a communication strategy and tactics that
executives can use that would be effective with global teams. The organization in this
study successfully engineered an executive-level communication plan involving
employees at all levels of the company. The tactics, purpose, audience, frequency, and
measurement of the plan were all clearly outlined. Communicators have a tremendous
opportunity to help managers and leaders unlock engagement and see performance
soar (Sparrow, 2012).
REFERENCES


