

## Blood: Water Technical eUpdate Vol. 27 – Establishing Internal Communications structures

Dear Partners,

At this half year mark, we were reflecting on how organizations are adapting to the rapidly changing development sector we operate in. It seems many of us are employing different tactics to adapt and thrive. We are seeing a lot of innovation and creativity in achieving these transformations and central to all of the strategies we are seeing is the pertinent question of how effective are our Internal Communication (IC) systems. It is therefore evident that IC is growing in relevance to enhance our ability to remain viable in our various spaces of impact. However, our teams are becoming more dispersed and mobile, thus presenting challenges for us to communicate effectively with them.

Despite these challenges, the goal of internal communication remains the same: **“effective and timely dissemination of crucial information to the most relevant audience within an organization”**

Internal communications systems therefore are the elements in an organization that are used to transmit information between organizational members or parts of the organization across all levels and units/departments of the organization.

Vertically, the formal structures between the various levels are often defined by the organizational hierarchical structure. This can structure how information is transmitted bottom up and from top to bottom. The best illustration of this is when a policy directive is issued from the board and trickles down to the lowest level of the organization and then feedback is given through the channels back to the board.

Horizontally, there are formal structures that are guided by the peer levels of accountability and responsibility. This is often also referred to as lateral communication. These are often useful for corroborations between different departments e.g. fundraising events being organized between programs, marketing and fundraising teams etc.

While the above describes the formal structures e.g. meetings, presentation, workshops, memos and reports; quite often there is the informal channels of communication that relies on relationships built across the organization. Friends, and colleagues rally around each other based on influence and temperaments. These can both be useful e.g. in change management processes or harmful to the organization when gossip and speculation travels through “grapevines” and “corridor” conversations.

I once sat in a discussion on IC where the speaker in this forum said: *“Email, chats, blogs, wikis, social networks, and iterative group chats like Slack exist now to make us more connected. We’ve gone far more mobile than we ever were and far more cloud than before. But these have not fundamentally changed the way we discover, create and share ideas”*

What this message communicated to me is that it is critical that although we have more modes of communicating in real time now than ever before, this does not necessarily yield to identifying and resolving the specific challenges of our IC in our workplaces. In so doing, we will be able to make a sensible platform decision and to develop strategies for putting them to their greatest use.

## A CASE FOR ROBUST INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Here is why you need to think some more about being strategic in meeting this challenge of making IC effective:

1. **Communication must outpace the speed of change:** We now accept that managing change is key to keeping us competitive. However, people do not like change and will resist it at every opportunity. Robust IC strategies will help mitigate this risk, create and reinforce the appropriate workplace culture and ultimately establish your brand in the market. This leads to nurturing and retaining top talent and engaging with your target populations appropriately.

Pro Tip: IC is invaluable in supporting the organization to minimize any discomfort a proposed change may cause to your key internal stakeholders.

2. **Workplace generation gaps should not be communication gaps:** Our workplaces are now characterized by very distinct generations. Millennials (approximately age 24-37) have overtaken baby boomers (approximately age 54-72) to become the largest sector of the workforce today and are taking over management positions and Generation Z (characterized as approximately below 24) are starting to take up their first full-time job. It can be argued that creating an engaging workplace for multigenerational employees requires strategies for addressing a wide range of sometimes conflicting values and communication styles. Strategic IC programs would include being deliberate about mentorship programs that encourage the younger employees to learn from their older peers.

Pro Tip: Effective IC strategies can help establish systems that foster beneficial relationships between workers of all ages.

3. **Trickle-Down communication is a Failure:** Top-Down hierarchical communication has proven to lead to delays, limited feedback and an unhealthy co-dependence on a few individuals to make decisions. Delegating responsibility for information dissemination can be empowering. For Example, providing middle level management with robust and mobile communication tools will enable them be better leaders;

Pro Tip: Dispersed two-way communication builds better understanding of the workforce and ultimately leads to better informed managers and more effective management decision making.

4. **Employees seek Purpose:** Today's employees, no matter their age, demand that their goals be clearly defined; they need to understand the plans for attaining these goals; and to be confident about the value of their individual contributions. They want to feel useful, that their opinions matter and that they are part of a team. Feedback and interaction is important in this age that has been created by social media "likes", "sharing" and

“*comments*”. Useful IC systems with this regard is broadcasting staff and/or departmental accomplishments.

Pro Tip: A well-functioning internal communication system can motivate employees to work toward a common goal. By highlighting the reasons behind what employees are being asked to do, the organization greatly boosts employee motivation.

- 5. You are competing with outside Noise:** The biggest fear organizations are now facing is “leakages”. It is unfortunate for employees to find out something about the organization from social media. We need information to come from the right source, in a timely manner and reaches all employees. This means that your IC channels need to be well-defined, fast, interactive, reliable and flexible. Quick editing and short approval processes for especially crises management help in this regard. It helps to have an internal communication channel/protocol standard operating procedure/outline in the organization.

Pro Tip: A skillful combination of new procedures, skills and technology can create trust and transparency, allowing organizations to retain control of their message. This mitigates against the risks of misinterpretation and rumors that can greatly hurt the workplace culture.

- 6. Informal Communication Can Distort Information:** As the famous song by Marvin Gaye goes “[I heard it through the grapevine](#)” adage can be all too common in our office corridors. While this can have its advantages in clarifying issues to some staff or even updating staff who missed a critical meeting etc, meanings can be distorted, misunderstandings can emerge and before you know it, a toxic work environment is created. Good IC can slow down the rumor mill by communicating quickly and frequently what is being “whispered” about. This helps build the right interpretation of information and instructions.

Pro Tip: Employees greatly value transparency in their interaction with different levels of management. Creating a rumor-free environment is critical to mitigating against an increasingly skeptical generation of employees.

## SIMPLE STEPS TO BUILDING YOUR IC SYSTEM

1. **What are the current practices:** We always begin with understanding: Conduct a simple communications audit? Ask a few people from varying levels of the organization general questions like:

- How would you describe the effectiveness of communications in this organization? Please explain.
- What do employees need to know? What additional things do employees want to know?
- What practices exist (vehicles) for sharing information? For each ask, how effective it is and what changes would improve communications.
- What are your most prominent information sources currently, formal and informal?

2. **Build a complete picture of the communications system:** gather information on:

a) <b>Channel and media:</b> <i>Are the best media being used to share information or are there more effective ways?</i>	b) <b>Audience and messenger</b> <i>For each channel and medium, what audience is receiving the message and who is the messenger.</i>	c) <b>Content</b> <i>What is the focus of each communication?</i>	d) <b>Time/frequency</b> <i>How often is the information disseminated?</i>
<p>Written e.g. emails, memos, blogs, texts etc. Spoken e.g. phone, conference calls etc. Blended e.g. meetings, presentations, face to face, web conferences etc. Traditional vs. Electronic forms:</p>	<p><u>Code:</u> top/down Bottom/up or Lateral  <i>(get information on how effective each flow has been)</i></p>	<p>Company goals, culture, job duties, decisions, employee updates, customer updates, progress and metrics etc</p>	<p>Daily, Weekly, Monthly Quarterly annually</p>

3. **Survey all employees to get their views:** Using the data you have picked, create a simple survey to get opinions on the list of recommendations mapped out as outlined in 2 above and gather views on how you might improve the communication. *(Attached is a sample of an IC survey from an organization X- I find the questions very useful)*
4. **Develop a communication plan/strategy and share it** *(Attached is Civicus toolkit for developing an internal communications strategy. I have found it very applicable in the past)*
5. Keep **evaluating!**

As usual, we are here to support you in actualizing some of these ideas we put to you. Do not hesitate to reach out if you need further clarity or would like to brainstorm on implementing any of the activities described above.

Have a fantastic August!

**Annex:**

1. **2017 Internal Communications Survey** This is an example of an IC survey; it will give you an idea of how sophisticated your surveys can be. This one was conducted using survey monkey. I find the questions very comprehensive and cover many aspects of employee relations and collaboration.
2. **ACU Internal Communications Policy:** This sample policy from the Australian Catholic University is very applicable to our various contexts. It is simple in format and comprehensive in nature to cover a range of communication channels we use commonly. I hope some are useful to you.
3. **Civicus Internal Communications Toolkit:** Designed to support civil society organizations in developing a comprehensive IC strategy. It will guide you in thinking strategically about why you need a formal IC system in the first place and then walks you through systematic process on establishing the strategy that defines the effective systems you can put in place. Source: [www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)

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