

1. **Write**

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2. **Your**

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3. **Communication**

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4. **Strategy**

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5. **In**

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6. **Eight**

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7. **Simple**

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8. **Steps**

## About this note

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# Comms in the real world

This note deals with the process and practice of writing a single communication strategy. In reality, you will most likely be working on several pieces of strategic communication at once, as well as ongoing tactical communication. Added to this, many of your audiences will overlap, either because they are key to more than one strategy or because communication inevitably leaks from one audience to another.

On top of all this, you may be operating with little or no direct feedback, and/or limited means of evaluating impact, whilst using proxies (number of likes, shares etc) to give you some sense of direction. This note will hopefully give you some pointers but it won't take away rising expectations, complexities, unforeseen interference, noise, or resourcing challenges that is life in public sector comms. Notwithstanding all that, I hope it will be helpful.

Mark Fletcher-Brown  
November 2020

# Defining terms

## Strategic communication

Strategic communication is about delivering change outcomes.

These outcomes may include changing perceptions, emotions, actions or knowledge. There may be others. Crucially, you should be clear about which outcomes you are trying to bring about before you set out. There is a danger in focusing on outputs. For example, focusing on social media may lead to improved outputs (more likes, shares) but may or may not result in the delivery of desirable outcomes. What's more, you may deliver unintended or untoward outcomes as a result of your activity. However, unless you track changes you will not know whether you have delivered desired, unintended, perverse, or no outcomes at all.

For simplicity, the acronym PEAK is used to refer to Perceptions, Emotions, Action and Knowledge outcomes.

## Tactical communication

Where you undertake tactical communication you may not know what your intended outcomes are. Rather, you may be focusing on outputs – more likes, more shares, greater positive media coverage. We may, in running a media campaign, measure success in terms of retweets, shares, or likes, without knowing whether such things indicate changes in an audience's perceptions, emotions, actions or knowledge. These measures may be useful proxy indicators rather than any means of measuring actual change.



# Key message

Unless you are clear about the problem you are trying to solve, the units in which success is measured, and how you'll know whether or not you've succeeded, it could be hard to demonstrate the value of your work.

**Be clear about  
the problem  
you are trying  
to solve and  
what success  
would look like**

## Be clear about the problem you are trying to solve and what success would look like

Before you set about creating a communication strategy you should be clear about which problem you are trying to solve. Write this in a single sentence.

This should tell you the answer to some key questions:

- The problem – is it real or perceived
- The audience(s)
- What the solution may look like

For example, we want to increase staff productivity by 5% in the next year.

Break this down into outcomes.

We want our staff to be aware of the need (knowledge) to increase productivity, to feel committed to a 5% increase (emotion) and to take the necessary action to produce this increase (action) within a twelve-month period.

I would advise against creating a strategy until you can specify in measurable terms what it is you are trying to achieve. Crucially, if your strategy is to be effective you will need to determine what has worked and what has not. Without a means of measuring success or otherwise, this will not be possible.

### Challenge and agree

Crucially, it's at this stage – when you agree the desired outcomes with whomever has commissioned your work – that you should challenge and agree. Do not commit yourself to something that is unachievable where most of the drivers for change are beyond your control. Or where the outcomes are non-specific - e.g. we want this organisation to have a better reputation.

Break non-specific goals into tangible, measurable outcomes. It's worth spending time agreeing deliverables with decision makers before setting out.

Keep in mind that your contribution may be judged by those who have no real knowledge about communication but who have a clear sense of what success looks like. It's vital that you understand what their criteria for

success are. You may be found wanting simply because you don't share a common understanding of critical goals.

## Resources

Be very clear about the resource implications involved in delivering the outcome.

- What will it take, end-to-end, to deliver outcomes?
- What input from you will be required?
- How long will you or others need to work on this task?
- What additional skills, materials, input will be needed?
- Financial implications
- Opportunity cost – what will you have to drop in order to deliver?

If you commit yourself to delivering an outcome without being clear about the implications, you are potentially setting yourself up for failure.

## Perceived problems

None of the above means you shouldn't try to solve perceived problems. Perceived problems are still problems in that they exist in the minds of key people.

Approach these by working with the person concerned to (a) establish what success will look like; and (b) determine whether this is achievable. The risk here is in getting saddled with something that is both perceived only and insoluble.

Be prepared to spend time getting to the heart of the perceived problem. For example, you may be commissioned to improve the reputation of the place in which you work. Gather data first. How is this place perceived and by whom? What factors are they taking into account in reaching their view? Are these factors able to be altered?

## Examples

In an audit for a town, some interviewees said their perceptions were framed by the poor condition of front gardens on the main route in. The presence of settees and other pieces of furniture had a powerful negative framing effect.

But this over-reliance of simple proxies worked to the advantage of an organisation. Respondents' perceptions were framed by the chief executive, a highly competent warm individual of national standing. So even though the organisation's performance was weak in places, the chief executive's reputation was, in effect, able to "offset" negative perceptions.

## Understand what success looks like and factor that into your plan

When a senior leader asks for a communication strategy, they may not have time or inclination to worry about many of the elements in this note – things like starting points and measurable end goals. They will just want something to be done. That can be hard to either challenge or resist since such requests, if denied, may prompt questions about the value of communication spending.

In reality, this means you will have to focus on managing how you are perceived as you go about your work. Sometimes you just have to get on with it, such is the pressure for action.

But you should always try to be clear about how success will be judged. So a communication strategy, designed, for example, to tackle a "bad press" may actually have to centre on understanding which stories have upset the person. There may be recent press coverage that has focused on uncomfortable items or even awkward revelations. So your strategy may turn into an urgent need for better issue management/media training/ early intervention.

Importantly, if your subsequent activity is seen to deliver then the strategy will be a success. If not, then whatever your evaluation might show, your strategy may be perceived as a failure. Perceptions, as always, are everything. And perceptions are all the more significant when they are in the eyes of powerful beholders.

Sometimes success will elude you no matter what you do. Sometimes perceived problems are founded on long-standing habits or ingrained

prejudices. Where I have encountered this, I have sought to change minds by commissioning tangible evidence. For example, in tackling negative perceptions, some leaders may be reluctant (for many reasons) to bring in actual facts and may prefer to operate on the basis of their assumptions. This can create its own problems. First, you may find yourself telling a senior leader that what they perceive to be a problem isn't. They're not always keen to hear that. Whatever evidence you may bring may not change their minds.

Second, you may find things out that people simply don't want to hear. And then you may turn from being the provider of solutions to the bearer of bad news. So, tread warily. The distance between hero and zero is but a small step.

**Where are you  
starting from?**

## Where are you starting from?

By setting out the outcomes you want, you are effectively defining the end point – where you are going. Setting a baseline is about defining the starting point – this is where you are now.

The focus here is on research. My experience of agreeing the baseline data is very mixed. I have found that senior leaders may believe there to be a problem and may even have commissioned a strategy on the back of that belief without having any sense of the actual issue at all.

Getting actual data is not easy. It can be labour intensive and even where you've gathered in research, it may not be reliable. For example, you could carry out a reputation audit to establish how your organisation is perceived by key local stakeholders. But unless the methodology is sound, you may find that you are simply reinforcing prejudices through poorly worded questions.

Equally, you may have to carry out an audit that, whilst sound methodologically, could throw up uncomfortable findings, ones that senior leaders are keen to ignore or downplay. For example, when tackling internal challenges, research may identify issues that could be presented (by other interests) as judgement on the present leadership, thus creating a new set of problems that will have to be addressed. Few people will thank you for undermining the credibility of senior leaders.

This whole area is a potential minefield, which is one of the reasons that this stage of the process may be skipped. You may be tempted to make assumptions about the baseline, or worse, to base the starting point upon a set of hidden or unchallenged assumptions. Neither approach will help. You may set out to solve one set of assumed problems only to make matters worse by carrying out activities that do nothing to progress your aims. The one saving grace might be poor evaluation – you may never find out how ineffective your work has been because you have not sought clarity about either a starting or an end point.

If you are to make your communication count, nail down the baseline – and cross reference this against your desired strategic outcomes. To do otherwise is to simply engage in tactical communication which may or may not move things forward.

Keep in mind that you will later want to measure the extent to which you have been successful or otherwise, whether or not you wish to share the results of your endeavours.



**Gather audience  
insight that will  
enable you to  
deliver change**

## Gather audience insight that will enable you to deliver change

If you are going to use communication to change an audience's perceptions, emotional state, persuade it (them) to take action, or even to alter what they know, then you will need to gather insight. You will need to see the world as they see it. It's very easy to make the mistake of thinking that an audience sees the world as you do.

The key is to find out as much as you possibly can about the audience with whom you want to communicate.

So find out:

- Who each audience is and what they want
- How homogeneous or diverse this audience is
- Whether it is one or many smaller audiences
- Who their internal influencers or opinion formers are
- How they see the world and make judgements
- What they may want
- What benefits your content may offer them
- How they see you
- Who else is competing for their attention
- How much attention you are likely to get
- The best time, place and medium to reach them
- What matters to them
- What words and concepts you may use to frame your message to make it interesting to them
- How they see you – whether they trust you (your organisation/ senior leaders) or not

In short, find out as much as you can.

If you want to alter the way that an audience feels about something, for example, to change their emotional state, you will need to gather insight

about the kinds of things, issues, and concepts that are likely to cause an emotional reaction. You may, for example, try to engender a sense of belonging, something that features in the Maslow hierarchy of needs. In doing so, you may focus on the us in your message as opposed to those who are not us – or them. The us-them paradigm can create a sense of belonging but may engender dislike or even stronger emotions about those who are not us. This latter emotion may not be helpful to you.

Where you are setting out to change an emotional state, you should establish what matters to them. It may be that you want to create a feeling of injustice, for example, as a means of creating a powerful call to action, to get an audience to do something it would not otherwise do. Given the possibility of unleashing potentially unhelpful emotions or behaviours, you should test your messages in advance to ensure that you reduce the danger of producing untoward outcomes.

You should also review any existing material and research that will potentially provide useful guidance on how to deliver a particular outcome. In all likelihood, you will be able to find academic research (or insight from elsewhere in your networks) that you can use to inform your approach.

## Understand how audiences see themselves

An audience (or public) is a group of people who share a common interest and who may define themselves by that interest. A person may belong to many audiences. For example, a 35-year-old man may at the same time be a church-goer, a father or parent, a doctor, a rugby player, a Welshman and a bird-watcher. So if you want to reach that person, you would first have to ensure that your message was relevant to an audience characteristic (you wouldn't place an article about recovering from rugby injuries in a bird-watching magazine unless you made the link clear).

Before you communicate with any individuals you should understand the audience that they are part of. Importantly, whilst you may define an individual as part of a particular audience it is how they define themselves that will matter. Our rugby-playing, bird-watching doctor may first and foremost define himself as a gay man and may be motivated to seek out content that meets his needs and wants.

## Multiple audiences

In all likelihood, you will be communicating at any time with multiple audiences. It follows that you will have to develop an understanding of each by gathering insight, and shape your content (see below) to meet their different needs. You may also need to think about the impact of communicating with one audience on communication with others. Audiences are not hermetically sealed. And content will bleed from one audience to another. You may need to think about the extent to which your content could be shared unhelpfully with audiences you may not wish to reach. Killer content (that which we feel compelled to share) can go viral in ways that turn out to be unhelpful.

## Crucial insight on you

You should try to understand how much trust and confidence audiences have in you (your organisation/key senior leaders/key figures) as this will have a significant impact on the extent to which your content is received/believed/acted upon.

## Bias could interfere

Wherever possible, commission original research rather than relying upon other interests to provide insight. Some of these may be vested interests keen to represent others' views in ways that suit them rather than the audiences you need to reach. Reliable insight is crucial if you are to effectively deliver outcomes.

# Develop content that drives change

## Develop content that drives change

Content is the engine that will deliver the outcomes you want. It is by saying and doing things that matter to the audience you are trying to reach that you will secure change.

But you will need to know what things you will need to say and do. Simply speaking may do little – although that will depend upon what you say.

The key is to work out what content you will need to present to your audience to bring about change. And that will depend upon what kind of change you want.

I have set out below some factors that you may wish to ponder. But the acid test for all content is whether or not it works and delivers what you want. Often this can be trial and error, so pre-launch market testing can help. You may also want to review existing research material and use this to drive your content. And, if you can, talk to people who have already done this kind of work to see what you can learn/borrow from them.

### Benefits

One of the main reasons we seek out content is because it delivers a benefit, something that matters to us. You should know from insight research what your audiences want. If you are in a position to deliver what an audience really wants then you will get their attention, provided they trust that you are able to deliver.

### Perceptions

If your aim is to alter perceptions you may want to begin by understanding the source and nature of current perceptions. This can be time-consuming. A perception audit, for example, will help you tease out current views alongside a deeper understanding of the ways in which particular audiences reach judgements. This will probably include a healthy smattering of biases and prejudices, some of which you may be able to alter; others less so. You may wish to review Perceptionomics for ideas.

## Emotions

If you want to change emotions, you may want to focus on words, concepts and actions that trigger particular emotional responses. Again, understanding an audience's starting emotion will help you to hone messages that deliver change. Other organisations (and media) may also develop content that change emotions (e.g. tabloids) so you could consider what makes their content effective.

## Action

Persuading an audience to take action may involve thinking about an audience's motivations and the combination of pull and push factors that may cause it to act. There may be a great deal to learn from commercial communication here, which, whilst they have bigger budgets, may nonetheless yield insight into factors that may drive change.

## Knowledge

If your aim is to ensure that an audience knows something you may focus on packaging knowledge so that it is interesting, engaging, shareable, memorable, thought-provoking and appropriately simple. The more complex the information, the smaller the potential audience. You will want to think about what words and concepts are meaningful to the audience and what message may confer some kind of benefit.

## You, again

In the midst of this, you will need to assess whether the you in the equation has sufficient weight and credibility to attract attention for your message in the first place.

A driving concept is the idea around which all your content coalesces. Broadly, this should deliver a benefit to your key audience, be expressed in words and concepts they understand and be shareable (helping you to spread the word whilst simultaneously endorsing the idea).

The stronger the concept or driving idea that underpins your communication, that delivers a benefit to an audience and that achieves cut-through, the more likely you will be to achieve your outcomes.

## Language

There is a tendency amongst large complex organisations (and I generalise) to make communication more complicated than it needs to be. This can mean using esoteric terms, specialised vocabulary, and jargon. In some cases, unless your audiences have particular forms of prior knowledge, your messages may be all but impenetrable. Broadly, the more complex the communication, the smaller the audience, the shorter the time given to the message. If you want to maximise attention and interest, avoid this.



**Agree the  
four Ms: Media,  
messaging,  
messages and  
meaningful  
actions**

## Agree the four Ms: Media, messengers, messages and meaningful actions

### Media

Be clear which media you will use to reach your audience. Choose media that are credible and have an existing pull on this audience. Avoid, if you can, simply being media-led. If you set out, for example, to create social media strategy, you are predetermining the medium without necessarily determining the outcome you want. Always choose the medium or media that will help you to deliver the desired outcome as effectively and efficiently as possible. Again, asking your audience which media they are most likely to give attention to will make your life easier.

Credibility is important. It's vital that your chosen medium is deemed believable and trustworthy by your audience. So whilst you may opt for a medium over which you have total control (such as a blog, newsletter or an intranet) you may sacrifice credibility in doing so. One way to add credibility to your own media is to be counter-intuitive in the way you treat content. If you publish content that challenges the approach you are taking or is uncomfortable for senior leaders, you are more likely to get attention and build trust.

You may increase the credibility of your message by pushing it out through traditional media but since you won't be able to control the shape of what eventually gets broadcast or printed you will be sacrificing control for credibility.

### Messengers – the people who deliver messages

Choose as messengers people who are seen as credible with your audience. It's tempting to push forward senior leaders clamouring for these top spots as a way of increasing their reach. But unless you consider the audience's perspective your choice of messenger may get in the way of the message.

You will need to factor in the latent characteristics of the messenger so that they are congruent with the message itself. If someone is warm and friendly, they might be better suited to an empathetic message designed to elicit a positive emotional outcome. Conversely, choosing someone who is naturally

cold and distant may undermine an empathetic outcome – or worse, produce an emotional outcome you don't want.

Be audience-led. It's not what this person means to you but what they mean to them that matters. And at all times, keep the desired outcome front and centre in your mind.

## Messages

This is what your messengers will actually say to each audience. Messages should add value to your audiences' lives. Ideally, they should deliver some kind of a benefit (in terms that are meaningful to the audience).

Repetition is also important. Your messenger will be saying the same thing repeatedly in order to produce the outcome. So the words need to be capable of repetition without becoming either bland (and ignorable) or boring.

There are many rhetorical devices you can use to build messages. The following are commonplace:

- Three-part lists – this is about jobs, jobs, jobs
- Contrasting pairs – this is not about getting everyone to work harder, but getting everyone to work better
- Simile – changing what we do is like trying to push treacle uphill
- Metaphor – we are a supertanker; change will be slow but working together we'll turn the corner
- Unusual and catchy ideas – the double whammy
- Narratives or stories, particularly if they are authentic, can help drive content. This is one of the reasons why case studies can help drive change

### **Cliché alert**

The trouble with many of these devices is that they're by definition, tired. When we listen to a senior leader speak on radio, we can anticipate the third part of their three-part list whilst simultaneously forgetting the first two parts.

You will need to create a message or a set of messages that will cut through, that will make sense to your audience, that will give them something that

they want and, importantly, that they in turn might share with others, thus magnifying your message and helping it to reach more people.

But messages alone, particularly when seeking to bring about behavioural change, are rarely enough. That said, if you can find content or messages that make a real difference to your audiences (in that they confound low expectations or add tangible benefits) you will get more attention and increase the possibility of change.

## Meaningful actions

Leadership is as much about demonstration as it is about communication. Doing things, taking specific meaningful actions, can send out powerful messages. Indeed a gap between what leaders profess and what they actually do can undermine the message, damage their credibility and bleed trust.

Again, be audience-led here. Don't assume that you know what actions will make an impact on the audience. Ask them. Find out what actions they would need to see your messenger and other key figures take in order to produce the outcomes you want.

For example, in working with one organisation, we asked staff and managers what actions senior leaders would have to take in order for them to believe they were capable of changing the organisation for the better. The senior leadership team openly received and acted on the results, building their credibility, trust and a platform for much-needed systemic and cultural change.

You may need to calibrate your actions as you would the messages you send out. For example, if you were trying to bring about behavioural change in your organisation, you might want senior leaders to demonstrate the change first. Depending on the reaction of your key audience (this could be staff, team leaders, managers, senior managers) you may have to adjust the actions that are taken – focusing on specific areas, for instance.

# Anticipate complications

## Anticipate complications

Whatever your message or your intended outcomes, your audiences will not be sitting back waiting for your communication to arrive, eager to consume it when it does. Your insight should tell you whether an audience is likely to be receptive to your message. In truth, they may want the opposite of what you want. For example, you may want to increase productivity for no increase in pay; they may want no increase in productivity but more money. So when you set out your goals (your desired outcomes) you will need to factor in achievability.

At the same time, others may want to reach your audiences and persuade them to do other things. It's highly likely that any audience you want to reach will be simultaneously bombarded by other messages and communication that may make it almost impossible to cut through. Communicating at certain times of the year, for example at Christmas, in the summer holidays, or at times of national or local crises, will make most of what you say irrelevant.

And alongside all of this, in any leadership environment, there may be those around the top table who, whilst paying lip service to your strategy, are in reality actively (and covertly) undermining it by behaving in ways that are out of sync with your core message. Your principal messengers could be undermined by other actions they take that damage their credibility. Imagine, for example, the chief executive who launches an austerity drive whilst the local paper publishes stories about their expensive office redecoration or fancy new lease car.

You may also find that those who are commissioning your communication services want to be seen to be doing something rather than actually achieving it.

Before you launch any strategy, you should factor in (as much as you are able) the complications that could undermine your approach. Treat these possibilities as you would any form of risk – understand the likelihood, significance, and plan possible mitigation.

# **Seconds out: Get attention and push your content**

## Seconds out: Get attention and push your content

In terms of the amount of attention you are likely to get: think seconds not minutes.

None of the above will matter unless you can attract an audience's attention. It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that sending out communication (in words or actions) is the same as an audience receiving and acting on it. Your insight research should give you a sense of the kinds of things that you would have to do to attract attention as well as the amount of attention, the number of seconds, your messages will get.

When you convert your strategy into an action plan, you will need to put the actions in the order most likely to grab and sustain audience attention. Constant evaluation will enable you to judge whether your strategy is working or not. Many things don't work. This will only matter if you are unable to learn from your failings. A failure to evaluate, particularly en route, will make it hard for you to correct your actions if you go off track.

It is vital that alongside understanding an audience's needs and wants, you develop insight into the matters potentially occupying their attention at this point in time. You will not be the only organisation (or individual) seeking to engage this audience. And you may well have to steal attention from others before you focus attention on your content.

Remember that all content could have an impact on an audience's attention, emotional state, and time management. Understanding the impact of not only your messaging but others' actions (alongside events) will matter.

The more you understand life from the point of view of this audience in real time the greater the chance you will have of securing their attention. Try to separate the factors over which you may have some influence – day-to-day relationships, for example – from those over which you will have no control or influence whatsoever (things happening in the real world).

For example, if you were undergoing an “organisational transformation”, you would get virtually undivided attention. But since most of the attention will be focused on the possibility of job losses (and whether an individual will have one), other messages about new, different and exciting ways of working could be ignored.



## Turn this work into action

You will need to schedule all activity with a clear plan, clear responsibilities and a means of tracking success (or otherwise) as you go. This is the who will do what, where and when, with which anticipated outcomes stage. Importantly, plan all relevant resources in the light of current pressures on your team.

Try to tie all activity to the outcomes you want and evaluate what works and what does not so that you can disinvest from activities that are not giving you a return on investment.

**Did it work?  
Evaluate.**

## Did it work? Evaluate.

The key here is to measure success (or failure) against the outcomes you set out to change. Of course, as noted above, if you have no baseline, it will be difficult for you to judge one way or another. Alternatively, you may be tempted to measure the wrong things and proclaim this a success.

For example, imagine you set to out to build awareness of your organisation and its goals amongst 25 to 35 year-old local people. Your strategy centres on a media campaign. You do not gather information about current levels of awareness and evaluate the level of media coverage your campaign achieves by measuring the number of stories, the number of column inches, whether the coverage is positive or negative and the placing of stories (front pages, leading articles and so on). You judge that it was a success when you realise that you have had sustained coverage which would have cost £15,000 in equivalent advertising spend (the amount of space that you would have had to pay for should this have been a paid-for campaign).

But was it a success?

In this case, it would be hard to know since you have neither baseline data (what this audience knows about you) or any end-point data. You would essentially be using a proxy measure (media coverage as a stand-in for audience awareness) but you would have no real data to support your position either way.

So when you seek to evaluate ensure that you are evaluating progress towards your outcomes.

Equally, it's important to track progress against outcomes as you advance your strategy. This is because gathering real-time data will allow you to change your approach if you find that your plans are not delivering.

Always, learn from progress or failure. You will both be able to improve your approach and avoid previously encountered pitfalls.

# Why do strategies fail?

# Why do strategies fail?

None of the above is complex. Yet it doesn't always happen. So here are some observations on why strategies either don't work or don't exist. These are by definition partial and based on my own experience and that of clients who've chosen to share misgivings.

## We don't know

Some strategies are never evaluated. Some may be only partially implemented. Others may be implemented but in ways never envisaged. Some may simply be written to be noted, minuted and shelved.

## No starting or end point

Strategies can simply be action plans: lists of planned activity that have neither a clear starting point nor any outcomes that can be measured.

## Misalignment between behaviour and action

It can be hard to ensure that your communication messages align with leadership behaviour when leaders refuse to acknowledge the impact of such behaviour on outcomes. Audiences may draw their own conclusions where there are authenticity gaps and may choose to disregard the message (or pay no attention whatsoever to it) and follow leaders' behaviour instead. Single deviations in expected behaviour can undermine entire strategies.

## A response to 'something must be done' syndrome

A strategy can feel like action. It can create the impression that something is being done. But unless it's locked into real change it may simply form part of a leadership narrative that action is being taken.

## A leadership pre-requisite

Leadership teams may express the desire to have a "communication strategy" but this may exist in a parallel world, divorced from their corporate

planning and resource cycle. There may be no relationship between your strategy and planned management action. You might want to question why there's a need for a strategy and how it relates to real change. Indeed, your corporate comms strategy may exist alongside a number of other "change" strategies but lack any cross-referencing.

## Business as usual

Communication strategies are about change. But organisations can be extraordinarily resistant to change, not least because there can be both winners and losers. Having a strategy for change can signal change whilst simultaneously avoiding it. Comms strategies can create the warm sense of forward movement whilst enabling the firm planting of feet on the ground.

## No data

Some strategies I've read (and critiqued) have been beautifully-written statements of principle. For those interested in communication models and best practice, they can be useful documents. What they offer in explanation they can miss out on data and any sense that something specific might happen within a specific time period that will or may have a specific impact.

## Proxy wars

Corporate life can be challenging with leadership teams effectively playing out proxy wars and battles for supremacy through a variety of media and mechanisms. As one chief executive put it to me: "I'm in charge of a team of people none of whom I was involved in appointing and most of whom think they can do my job better than me". Enter the comms strategy as control device – a means of binding people to an agreed course of action. Even where strong chief executives are able to get agreement to broad approaches, various others will jockey for position and seek to weaken any form of evaluation (thus limiting corporate reach).

## Strategy as "good PR"

Strategy documents may be put into the public domain to position organisations or their leaders. They will talk of bold things, of brilliant

outcomes and will present the world as it will be. This approach, whilst helpful in publicly accountable organisations, can lack real bite unless they also report the results. Invariably, that can mean the good bits are promoted whilst the failed approaches are omitted.

There's too much uncertainty to know whether our comms have a positive or a negative impact on real outcomes.

With the best will in the world, and with the favourable wind of unlimited resources, communication strategies will not necessarily deliver because of the complexity of real life. Think about any audience whose views, attitudes or behaviour you may wish to alter. Look at life from that point of view and you will quickly realise that they are assailed by many messages, influences and events. Added to which, each of us, as individuals may be predisposed to different behaviours in different circumstances for a multitude of reasons. Communication strategies can create the impression that life change is able to be planned and delivered. Sometimes it can be influenced. Rarely can it be controlled. And, of course, few communication teams have unlimited resources. We need to prioritise and target messages. In the world of "big" corporate concerns, we are often using pea-shooters in a nuclear war.

## Leaders change things

Leaders can exert a butterfly effect, irrespective of any communication strategy that may inform their actions. Leadership behaviour can cause others to behave differently. Leaders' attitudes can influence others' attitudes. And charismatic leaders can alter cultures, change outlooks and alter history. Any review of the last century will tell us how this has worked for good or ill. Understanding how leaders may be deployed to bring about change is vital in terms of creating successful change strategies. But linking one to the other may be less easy. Leaders lead. Communication supports. Sometimes these align.

## Black swans

There's an argument that says real change is delivered by unforeseen, unanticipated disruption. Whilst we may seek to take credit for such change in our communication, causality is hard to prove. And leaders, satisfied that change is heading in the right direction, may not care why it's happening.

**Some ways to  
put yourself in  
the best possible  
place to deliver  
your strategy**



## Some ways to put yourself in the best possible place to deliver your strategy

### Understand what's driving the need for a strategy

This is about separating the something must be done from doing something helpful. It is possible, of course, that you, in seeking to change things in an indeterminate way, might make things worse; you could produce perverse or unhelpful outcomes. Talk to those who are commissioning the strategy to establish the actual problem they're trying to solve. You might find that activity, of any kind, is helpful. In which case you may produce a different kind of solution.

### Review the last attempt

In all likelihood, you may not be the first person to set out to solve this particular problem. There may, for example, have been previous change or “transformation” strategies. Dig them out. Understand what worked and what did not. Look at how the communications were executed and what can be learned. There's a real danger of wheel-reinvention in change. Everyone wants to do things their way. The risk, from an organisational point of view, is that you, in starting afresh, simply compound rather than address hitherto unsolved problems.

### Data, data, data

Ask for access to the data that define the problem as it's being described. You may be lucky and find a treasure trove of useful facts and figures, wonderful insight and second-to-none research. If so, use it to inform your strategy. If not, start to assemble this. There is sometimes a reluctance to establish the facts around a perceived problem. To some this might look like inaction. In reality, it's about preventing the wrong kind of action.

## Review existing activity against outcomes

This is far more complex. In essence, your strategy will be an attempt, or part of an attempt, to bring about change. But change is already happening. It may be going in the wrong direction. All the same, the better you can understand what actions are generating change the better you may be able to use or modify these drivers to produce the outcomes you have been commissioned to deliver.

## Facilitate a conversation to resolve inherent conflicts

Complex organisations will sometimes have multiple, overlapping strategies that may contradict one another, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not. One set of leaders may be driving in one direction, whilst another heads off in a different direction. Meantime, a third group, oblivious to the efforts of the other two, is determined that their way is the way. And then some.

If you have been commissioned to write/create a corporate strategy, talk to the leadership team and try to tease out what outcomes are priority for each key audience. Use this as a means to carry out an audit so you can map activity against audiences and outcomes. You might well find that nobody has done this before so immediately you will be adding value.

# Useful texts

## Useful texts

The Mind is Flat: The Illusion of Mental Depth and The Improvised Mind

— *Chater, Nick*

Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life

— *Eyal, Nir*

Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment

— *Gilovich, Thomas, Griffin, Dale, and Kahneman, Daniel.*

Thinking Fast and Slow

— *Kahneman, Daniel*

Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind

— *Kline, Nancy*

The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable

— *Taleb, Nassim Nicholas*

Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion

— *Tolentino, Jia*

Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction

— *Tetlock, Philip and Gardner, Dan*

Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness

— *Thaler, Richard H. and Sunstein, Cass R.*

The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads

— *Wu, Tim*