

Communication Planning

As you sit down to plan your next important business communication, remember that it's someone else's response to what you say that determines your success. What you think is important, innovative, or entertaining only has value for your business if it moves others to take the desired action on your words.



It's never enough to simply educate or inform. As a business communicator, there has to be a "change," or " Δ ," that you want from someone else when you communicate. Otherwise, you are simply dumping data. Clarify and articulate that single, observable, measurable " Δ " first, and the ideas you need to share become what others need to hear to be willing to change. On the other hand, start with your favorite joke and then give the highly-ritualized "tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them" speech, and you've forgotten about two of most important elements of effective communication planning: the " Δ " you want and the needs of the people you are talking to.

Here's how to make sure you get the result you want through strategic idea development.

I. The " Δ "

Know the specific change you want from each particular communication. Leaders who can picture others doing something as a result of their words will always have a more focused, connected "argument" (i.e., ideas) than people who simply organize content.

When you finish this talk what *one thing* will your listeners *do* (*not* understand or hear)? Examples: implement the strategy, sign the order, agree to another meeting

Use the following statement to clarify your " Δ ": At the end of this meeting, the people I am talking to will _____ (single action verb, such as agree to, accept, sign, etc.)

2. Other's Needs

If you don't fully understand the reality of the people you are talking to, you will never be able to select ideas that will activate them. Take the time to get as complete a picture as possible of the people who will determine your success: the people you talk to. Do research. Make phone calls. Send out surveys if you have to, but know their needs before you start thinking about what to say.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Who are the other people in this communication?
- What do they need?
- What drives their choices and decisions?
- Do they want money, achievement, an easier day?

3. Your Needs

Know your own needs well enough to keep them from interfering with truly meeting the needs of others.

If you are not willing to identify your own needs and put them on the back burner, they may be unconsciously driving what you say and how you say it.

For instance:

- Do you like to talk? You may go on too long.
- Do you think you are funny? Your jokes may distract your listeners from what's really important.
- Do you need approval? Your words and body may be throwing away your power to convince.

It's also important to distinguish between a long-term, intermediate, or short-term "Δ."

For instance:

- Are you trying to close too fast? You may push an agenda that isn't appropriate.
- Is this business relationship ready for this type of meeting? You may need to choose a different medium for communicating.

4. Core Message

Advertisers are masters at using information about potential customers and consumers to create memorable slogans and "messages."

Examples:

- You want guaranteed next-day delivery:
Fed X used to say, "When it absolutely positively has to be there overnight."
- You want fewer hassles at car dealerships:
Saturn had no-haggle prices and non-commissioned sales people.
- You wanted more meat in your burgers:
Wendy's said, "Where's the Beef?"

Now, take what you know about the needs of the people you are talking to, put them together with the “Δ” you want, and you have your core message. If the core message is really going to get listeners’ attention, it needs to clearly say “What’s In It For Them” to do what you want them to do. An effective message is usually a sentence or two at the beginning of a talk that makes a promise to deliver something valuable to the people you talk to, but only if they do your “Δ.”

Examples:

- “This strategy is the key to increasing market share.”
You want the strategy implemented; this executive wants increased market share.
- “Accepting this order now means more profits tomorrow.”
You want him to sign the order; this prospect wants profits soon.
- “ Let me come back on Thursday and I’ll show you how we can improve your ratings.”
You want another meeting; your client wants improved ratings.
- “A real coaching relationship is the key to lower turnover.”
You want managers to coach; managers want lower turnover.

A strong core message gives others a reason to listen to what you have to say because it promises something they want.

The test of a strong message is that if others are convinced you can deliver on your promise, then you should be confident they will do your “Δ.” On the other hand, if they believe you can deliver on the promise in your message, but still say “so what?” then you didn’t focus on a compelling enough need. And, if they believe the promise, but it doesn’t move them to do your “Δ,” then there wasn’t a clear enough “quid pro quo” in your message (i.e., do my “Δ” and I’ll get you something you really need).

5. Idea Selection

A good message gets people’s attention with the promise of meeting a real need, and raises important questions in their minds. If your message is completely driven by the needs of the people you talk to, then the answers to the questions raised in your core message let you convince others you can deliver on that promise. If the answers to those questions are convincing enough, and the promise is compelling enough, then the people you are talking to will do your “Δ.”

Look back to your message for the questions that fall straight out of it. The answers should convince the people you are talking to that you can deliver on the promise in that message.

Examples:

- Message: "This strategy is the key to increasing market share."
Questions raised: "What is the strategy?" and "Why is it the key to market share?" and your answers become your supporting ideas.
- Message: "Accepting this offer now means profits tomorrow."
Questions that are raised: "What is the offer?", "Why does he need to accept it now?", and "How will it bring profits tomorrow?" and your answers become your supporting ideas.

6. The Prep

The first thing someone hears should prepare them to hear your core message. What do the people you are talking to need to hear to be ready to be pulled in by your message?

- Do you need to establish common ground?
- Lay your cards on the table?
- Bring people up to speed?
- Do they need waking up?

Again, let the needs of the people you are talking to and the "Δ" you want drive your "prep," not your need to tell funny stories, break the ice, or loosen up.

While it may seem counterintuitive to plan your "prep" near the end of the planning process, doing it at the end is the right place for this part of the process. Remember the "prep's" job is to get others ready to hear and be pulled in by your message.

7. The Close

Your close is never simply a summary. A strategic close does one of two things:

1. Directly asks your listener to do your "Δ," such as "Do you agree to implement this strategy?"
2. Indirectly reminds them of what is in it for them to do your "Δ" by restating your core message, such as, "In closing, implementing this strategy is the key to your success."

Remember, in business it's never enough to simply educate or inform. If you are going to be successful as a business communicator, others have to take action on your words. Use this communication planning process to connect, deepen relationships, and get the results you want—every time you talk.