



Internal Communications Guide

Tips to Strengthen and Streamline Employee Communications



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

DEFINING INTERNAL
COMMUNICATIONS

TONE & BRAND OF VOICE
GUIDELINES

COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGY

SPOKESPERSON ROLES
& RESPONSIBILITIES

CASCADE OF
COMMUNICATIONS

TIPS FOR IMPROVED
ENGAGEMENT

DEI BEST PRACTICES

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How to Use This Guide

This guide is intended to enable leadership, marketing, HR and culture teams to provide highly personalized, intentional, educational, accessible and timely communications that bolster employee engagement.

These communications are uniquely designed to elevate awareness of important company news (e.g., business updates, growth strategies, service expansions, acquisitions, new technology/system rollouts, leadership transitions and employee recognition); foster a greater sense of belonging and identification with the mission and purpose of the organization; and instill excitement in the future direction of a compassionate, people-first and diverse workforce.

This document isn't meant to be exhaustive but rather serve as a guide to strengthen and streamline employee communications.

“Courage, innovation and discipline help drive company performance, especially in tough economic times. Effective internal communications can keep employees engaged in the business and help companies retain key talent, provide consistent value to customers and deliver superior financial performance to shareholders.”

– Harvard Business Review

Defining Internal Communications

Creating effective internal communications is a key component of a successful business. According to Indeed, it's one of the most important factors for setting a company's culture. The way staff members interact with one another, both among peers and interactions between staff on different organizational tiers, determines the environment for the company. Effective internal communications help make the company atmosphere encouraging and safe so staff members can perform optimally.

Internal communications are vital to:

- Establishing company culture.
- Keeping staff informed.
- Giving employees a voice.
- Maintaining staff happiness.
- Navigating crises.
- Evolving the workplace.
- Controlling how professionals distribute information.
- Increasing company efficiency.



Tone & Brand Voice Guidelines

How we speak and write has a significant influence on how employees perceive us. The following characteristics describe our desired voice:

Trustworthy

Smart, insightful, well-informed, knowledgeable, professional

Human

Honest, down-to-earth, authentic, interested, easily digested, personable

Confident

Spirited, assured, bold, enthusiastic, pride of work

Positive

Optimistic, upbeat, fun, welcoming, value-focused

Empathetic

Straightforward, helpful, understanding



Communications Strategy

All internal communications efforts involve an element of change communications – helping employees successfully navigate change, aligning stakeholders around a shared vision, and preparing leaders to communicate complex organizational, strategy and operational transformation.



Discover & Assess



Define & Prioritize



Prepare & Plan



Launch & Sustain

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Discover & Assess. Get the right people into the conversation, analyze the needs, evaluate and anticipate organizational and stakeholder readiness, and their ability and capacity to undergo required change. This process includes an assessment of the change and the impact it will have on employees via change readiness assessments, interviews, focus groups, employee and leader listening sessions, surveys, etc. This provides a clear foundation to understand and customize change activities.



Define & Prioritize. Identify & align stakeholders/sponsors around the problem statement – what isn't working? What are the symptoms? Who is feeling the pain? Create a decision framework with criteria and constraints (scope of change, timing, budget), brainstorm options and choose a solution using the how/now/wow matrix, summarize and prioritize the vision, determine necessary resources and provide regular status updates to leadership.



Prepare & Plan. Create a comprehensive change communications strategy and engagement plan designed to address resistance and power struggles, balance workloads and build healthy team habits. This includes strategy development, message mapping, story building, tools and systems to bring the plan to life, etc. This provides a cohesive, integrated and repeatable approach for all change activities.



Launch & Sustain. Enact change strategy and execute project management responsibilities, build team trainings, identify outcomes, manage and see the project to completion, and measure success.



Spokesperson Roles & Responsibilities

This section details the spokesperson bench and outlines who is responsible for communicating to employees, ensuring they're equipped with detailed messaging and interactive practice sessions (as time/urgency allows) needed to be successful. For crisis situations, A.wordsmith would develop a notification tree with contact information and outline key decision-making processes.

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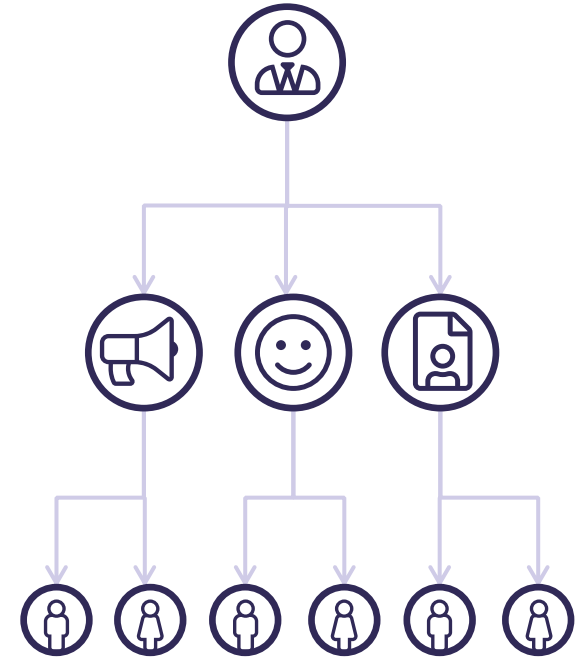
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The Visionary – CEO: CEO is responsible for delivering the vision, articulating excitement for important business updates and what employees can expect moving forward. Communications forums include all-hands meetings, town halls and monthly memos. Some months, this could include an inspirational/motivational video from the CEO describing why they're excited about an upcoming change and its positive impact on the future of the company.

The Educators and Strategy Shapers – Marketing, Culture and HR Teams: Marketing, culture and HR are responsible for training and educating managers. This ensures managers are equipped with the information, support and talking points needed to successfully relay company news and important updates to employees. They're also responsible for ensuring managers understand the timeline, strategy and respective roles in delivering the message.

The Context Setters – Department Managers: Managers are responsible for putting the news in context – addressing questions, and articulating the benefit + impact of the situation to their specific department/location. This could come in the form of team meetings, office hours, 1:1 sessions, or written information. Their role is to become stewards of the brand story and enthusiastically articulate the business impact/value to ensure employees understand the benefits to them/their role, their respective customers and how it aligns with the company's long-term vision and growth strategy.



Cascade of Communications

Given employees are the heartbeat of any company, they should be the first audience notified of ALL company news and announcements.



Two Keys to Success for General News

① Provide Access to For All

- Send a companywide email with critical communications and business updates, prompting employees to internal resources for more information.
- Craft an article/fact sheet for the company intranet or another internal channel.
- Ensure company updates are translated for non-English speaking employees, so they have equal access to information.

② Commit to Personal Connection

- Discuss business updates in weekly team check-ins (by location/department), manager meetings, and quarterly town halls.



Five-Step Process for Large-Scale, Confidential or Sensitive Announcements

- 1 Individual training sessions with executive leadership team, clearly outlining the timeline, strategy, and their role in delivering the message to employees. Send a follow-up email to the executive team, including detailed scripts and Q&A documents to help guide follow-up conversations to ensure key stakeholders are steeped in the messaging and prepared to speak enthusiastically about the overarching value of the announcement. During these sessions, the company's marketing and HR leads equip managers with succinct talk tracks and messaging for how to address questions that arise from direct reports and other internal stakeholders.
- 2 Company-wide all-hands meetings led by CEO. During this meeting, the CEO provides history overview, where the organization is, where it's going, future growth trajectory, renewed vision and company updates, creating excitement in the future direction of the company.
- 3 Following this meeting, send an email to all employees, and publish relevant materials and resources to internal properties.
- 4 Schedule office hours, breakout sessions, town halls and 1:1s to reinforce key messages and address any questions. The goal is to create an open, two-way forum where everyone's perspectives and concerns are valued and respected. This is especially important given some employees may not be comfortable asking questions in a public forum. Each session should have a clear structure, goal and intention to guide the conversation, ensuring a focused and productive use of time.
- 5 Implement employee training, as needed, to ensure new collaboration tools, technologies, systems and operational processes are rolled out seamlessly. This ensures a smooth transition with limited disruption.



Tips for Improved Engagement

- **Develop succinct positioning that clearly articulates what's being announced.**
This includes developing detailed talking points, FAQ documents, email language and interactive training and practice sessions so spokespeople are speaking from a consistent, united front.
- **Deliver a clear, crisp and consistent message.** Articulate the business decision, impact and value to ensure that your audience understands the overarching benefits to them/their role or services and how the announcement aligns with the company's long-term vision and growth strategy.
- **Share potential outcomes and scenarios of the future of the organization** (what the experience will look like going forward), so audiences can visualize and understand how the news could materialize over the long term. This helps prevent uncertainty, confusion and skepticism.

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- **Provide context and framing for the message so it is relevant for the audience.** This strategy prevents people from creating their own frames and stories, which ultimately increases the risk of misalignment, confusion and unease. When people create thoughts in their own head, false messages spread.
- **Reiterate the critical importance of confidentiality.** Failing to do so could have harmful repercussions for our customers and community partners.
- **Don't make promises, guarantees or claims we can't validate.** Be mindful of language. if we can't prove or promise something, be careful not to claim it.
- **Listen, engage and connect in an authentic way.** Create an open, two-way forum where everyone's perspectives, ideas and concerns are valued, respected and considered.
- **Present an inspiring vision for the future direction of the organization.** Instill confidence, reassurance and hope that you'll lead the way to a promising place while building a better tomorrow for our people, customers and communities. Remember that as leaders, it's important to guide your team through uncharted waters and reassure employees that the company's values and ethical standards are stronger than ever.



Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Best Practices

As the company is looking to build a better tomorrow for customers, communities, and ourselves, the language we use is a critical part of our communications with employees.

Inclusive language and imagery guide:

As a general rule, we follow AP Style guidelines where applicable, particularly for employee communications, except in cases in which we as a team feel that AP Style has not evolved quickly enough.



Race and Ethnicity

The AP Stylebook sums it up well:

“Reporting and writing about issues involving race calls for thoughtful consideration, precise language and an openness to discussions with others of diverse backgrounds about how to frame coverage or what language is most appropriate, accurate and fair.

...In all coverage—not just race-related coverage—strive to accurately represent the world, or a particular community, and its diversity through the people you quote and depict in all formats. Omissions and lack of inclusion can render people invisible and cause anguish.”

In all internal communications materials, ensure that you are using the most current, accurate and respectful term for people of that background. Consider whether you really need to use race as a qualifier.

Common race-and-ethnicity related terms and their usage, per AP style, are as follows (this list is not meant to be exhaustive; a full list can be found online):

- **American Indians, Native Americans:** Acceptable when referring to two or more people of differing tribal affiliations. When referring to an individual, use the name of his or her tribe.
- **Asian American:** Acceptable for an American of Asian descent.
- **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color):** BIPOC is a noun, and as an acronym that already includes “people,” it’s redundant to say “BIPOC people.”
- **Black (adj.):** Capitalize Black as an adjective in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense: Black people, Black culture, Black literature, Black studies, Black colleges. Do not use Black as a standalone noun.
- **Dual heritage terms:** African American is acceptable for Black Americans, but “African American” and “Black” are not necessarily interchangeable. Do not hyphenate this or any other dual heritage terms.
- **Indigenous:** Capitalize this term in referring to the original inhabitants of a place.



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Age

Be careful about imbuing personality traits to specific generations—while we often talk about trends related to Boomers and millennials, ensure that the traits you reference do more than simply reinforce stereotypes based on age. It's generally acceptable to describe people under the age of 18 as boys or girls, but be aware that referring to Black males of any age as "boys" can be perceived as demeaning due to historical use. In addition, the use of "girls" for women over the age of 18 is seen as sexist as it reinforces traditionally gendered styles, roles, behaviors and perceptions that can be harmful to women.

Gender

According to the AP Stylebook, gender refers to a person's social identity, while sex refers to biological characteristics. Use of the singular they (as well as them/their) as a gender-neutral pronoun is acceptable when he/she or her/him is not accurate. If you can reword a sentence to avoid gender, please do so. If that's not possible, use "they" or "their." Gendered descriptors like "mother of three" are often only relevant when talking about family or marriage or in profile pieces (for example, a blog focused on an employee biography). Consider whether you'd include the same detail if the person being described were a different gender.



Abilities/disabilities

The AP Stylebook uses “disabled” as a general term for a physical, mental, developmental or intellectual disability. Don’t describe someone as disabled or having a handicap unless it’s clearly relevant—and when detail is warranted, be as specific as possible. Keep in mind that a group of people who have the same disability is not homogenous; just as you’d avoid referring to an ethnic group en masse (e.g., “the Cuban Americans”), you should avoid grouping people together as “the disabled.”

Homelessness/ socioeconomic Status

Use person-first language: people experiencing homelessness in place of “homeless people” or “the homeless.” Refrain from using sports-based metaphors (e.g., “leveling the playing field”) that suggest winners and losers. In a similar vein, refer to lower-income areas as “neighborhoods with high poverty rates” or “low-income communities” (instead of using phrases like inner-city, high poverty or disadvantaged).

Imagery

The imagery we use to represent our company values should be relevant, authentic and inclusive. Accurately reflecting a diverse population builds meaningful connections and trust. Many stock image sites contain large libraries of imagery rife with stereotypes and cliches, so it is our job to thoughtfully and diligently seek out high-quality imagery that humanizes and celebrates the diversity of our employees and our communities.



“Teams that can openly share ideas, focus on the task, and communicate proactively should not be surprised by their achievements.”

REED MARKHAM

