

# Strategic Communication: Full-Time Function or Dysfunctional Concept?

By Dennis R. Ackley

**I**n some circles, “strategic communication” is being heralded as a new, optional component of the employee communication process. Barely a week goes by without some group promoting a seminar on the potential of “strategic communication.”

Doesn't this irritate sage employee communication professionals?

Don't take me wrong. I'm all for strategic communication. I just can't believe that employee communication leaders would put up with any “non-strategic communication.”

I'll go a step further: any employee communication function that's not practicing strategic communication full time is dysfunctional.

## ***A Sometimes Function?***

I'm baffled by the proponents' implication that strategic communication is an option.

Are they saying that *sometimes* employee communication *can* contribute to an organization's strategy ... or that *only some* communication needs to be aligned with the strategy?

Worse yet, are they admitting that employee communication—the key business and HR “vision-support function”—is cranking out stuff that doesn't advance the organization's strategy? If so, don't let the CEO find out!

## ***There Is No Option***

Every employee communication activity contributes to the organization's “personality” (Remember Gestalt?). To believe there's an option called “strategic communication” is to believe that

only certain parts of the organization's behavior reflect its personality.

It's this simple. The leaders of the employee communication function can intentionally plan how each communication activity will support the organization's mission and values. Or they can skip the planning and “just communicate.” In

either case, employees will judge how the communication actions and messages do or do not promote the organization's stated mission and values.

Every time employees receive non-strategy supporting communication, the organization—especially the communication function—risks being judged “guilty” by employees of not acting

in the “mission and vision way.” Why would the organization's leaders say they have a clear vision, a well-thought-out purpose, and a well-defined way of treating people—then have the communication activities fail to act like it? This “say-one-thing-and-do-another” syndrome is a key contributor to employee cynicism.

## ***What Employee Communication Should Do***

Employee communication—like every function—must help the organization make money, save money, improve customer satisfaction, and demonstrate the organization's people values. And it must propel the organization's vision by helping teach employees how to do their work in the “vision way.”

Every CEO deserves to see how the investment in employee communication is returning dividends—turning the vision into action.

***Any employee communication function that's not practicing strategic communication full time is dysfunctional.***

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Today’s employee communicators should be “painting the picture” of how the organization needs to act to accomplish its mission. Their painting should be titled “excellence in action”—a portrait depicting business accomplishments in the “vision way.” The brush strokes should share ideas from throughout the organization, celebrate victories, and include unfortunate outcomes as lessons in how to improve.

There are dozens of effective and efficient ways of delivering this information—through people, printed materials, and electronic means. Finding the best communication vehicles is part of the role of the employee communication function. Naturally, input from employees is needed to be sure the intended messages are getting through and being understood.

***An Excellence In Action Questionnaire***

Are your employee communication efforts and messages aligned with your organization’s strategy? The answers to the following questions will give you a solid indication.

- What information is being continually shared with employees about “excellence in action?”
- How does the way the communication takes place demonstrate the organization’s “people values?”
- What are employees being told about actions within the organization that are:
  - Saving money?
  - Making money?
  - Improving customer satisfaction?
  - Increasing shareholders’ value?
  - Demonstrating people values?
- Are there conflicts between...

What the leaders <b>say</b> ...	What employee communicators <b>do</b> ...
<i>We expect managers to be good communicators</i> .....	Fail to ask employees for feedback to measure managers’ effectiveness.
<i>We live for customer service</i> .....	Share no stories of how outstanding service is being provided.
<i>We believe in straight talk</i> .....	Use “company speak”—plus employees learn more from the “grapevine” or local newspapers.
<i>We focus on shareholder value</i> .....	Never describe how employees are improving it.
<i>We push information to employees</i> .....	Use “one-on-one” e-mail and Q&A formats that imply employees must ask the right questions to get answers.
<i>We value employees’ input</i> .....	Rarely celebrate employees’ ideas and initiatives.
<i>We appreciate loyalty</i> .....	Fail to acknowledge long-service employees or to describe the value of service-related benefit plans and policies.

## ***Planning Excellence In Action Communication***

The best way to put “excellence in action” in your communication is to bring together members of the employee communication team and senior leadership—and blank sheets of paper.

Leaders don’t look for well-worn paths to follow. Collecting information about communication techniques other organizations use provides useful information—not a **map**. Sure, you can gain some great ideas by finding out what other well-run employee communication functions do—and how well they do it. But just because some “world class” company does something doesn’t mean it will work at your organization. It might even be detrimental.

What you do must be aligned and crafted to support your business mission and values.

On those blank sheets—your “pallet”—write what the leaders say are the main elements in the organization’s mission ... the critical values...and how that translates into “excellence in action.” With this, you can plan how the communication function will “paint” the picture for employees.

Oh, you say you don’t have a clearly stated mission. Sure you do. Just ask your employees what they think the mission is ... what they think the organization’s values are ... what they think is the organization’s personality. Where do they get these ideas? Many of them come through the messages and actions of your communication—whether you planned “strategically” or not.



This article first appeared in the July 1997 issue of ***Communication World***

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### ***Dennis Ackley***

Dennis Ackley is a nationally recognized leader in benefit communication and retirement education. His innovative, award-winning communication programs have reached more than three million employees on topics such as retirement planning, investing, health care, benefit choices, pay, and incentive plans. Dennis has created communication campaigns for hundreds of the country’s largest employers. He has written more than four dozen articles for such publications as *HR Magazine*, *Benefits Quarterly*, *Employee Benefits News*, and *Communication World*. He is a featured speaker at scores of conferences including the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, Profit Sharing/401(k) Council, the PBGC, The Conference Board, Pensions & Investments, and Benefits Management Forum and Expo.

For more articles about how to improve employee communication and retirement education, search the Internet for “Dennis Ackley communication.”