

## How To Communicate Your Strategy

Despite all the books and articles that have been written on leadership communication, CEOs and senior executives spend too little time articulating the strategy across the organisation. Some CEOs, of course, are great at this. When I worked at the UK retailer, Boots the Chemists, for example, Richard Baker was brilliant at repeating the same message in all his communications – board meetings, newsletters, store visits, individual conversations.

Richard never knowingly missed an opportunity to articulate his strategic priorities and why they were important, and, unsurprisingly, the organisation quickly ‘got’ what the strategy was about and started to make it a reality.

Here are eight ways that you can improve your ability to communicate your company’s strategy:

1. **Keep it simple, stupid.** If a message is to be remembered it must be simple. That’s why it’s so important to focus on your few, big priorities, and not try and list everything. In Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign, the internal reminder about the message was a sign that read, “*The economy, stupid!*” What’s the simple focus you want to give your organisation?
2. **Have your 3-5 strategic priorities to refer to in every discussion.** This was the cornerstone of Richard Baker’s approach. Like a politician who has decided the answers she wants give, even before she’s been asked the questions, Richard was able to bring all of his responses back to his key priorities for the business.
3. **Expect to communicate it over 6,000 times.** Let’s say that your business strategy has a ‘life’ of three years. If you assume that there are circa 200 working days a year and that you have 10 opportunities to articulate the strategy each day, then there are up to 6,000 separate strategy communication opportunities over the three years. Of course, you could be more communicative, but let’s start somewhere!
4. **Have conversations, not speeches.** There is a time for major speeches to set out your strategy and vision, but that is just the start, not the end of your communication plan. More important is the drip, drip, drip of your daily conversations. Unless they are in line with your key messages, your carefully crafted annual speech will be quickly forgotten and ignored.
5. **Create an emotional connection, not just a rational argument.** Strong logic and rationale will help your people understand the new strategy, but they will only feel committed if there is an emotional impact as well. For example, one of my clients, Avon Cosmetics, focuses its message around its goal of ‘empowering women’. This message helps create an emotional connection between the company and its thousands of female representatives around the globe.
6. **Use stories and examples.** One way to create emotional engagement is to use stories. For example, when Sir Stuart Rose became CEO of UK retailer M&S, he used the story of how one product manager created a new espadrille shoe and had it delivered to the first store within 12 days of conceiving the idea, as an example to the rest of the business about effective risk taking.
7. **Appeal to your people’s self-interest.** People aren’t afraid of change ; they manage change on a daily basis. However, they will only act willingly when it is in their self-interest to do so. You need to make a connection with your people’s priorities. Aligning bonuses and rewards with your priorities are obvious ways that you can do this, but there are other approaches. Appealing to personal development and growth opportunities, increasing the sense of belonging between the company and its people,

and demonstrating the wider importance of the work of your organization are all factors which have been shown to affect employee satisfaction and loyalty.

8. **Take visible action.** In the end, of course, actions speak louder than words. By taking action consistent with your message, people will see that you are serious; without action your message is just empty words. For example, P&G's ex-CEO, AG Lafley, hammered home his message that 'the consumer is boss' by ensuring each of his business trips included in-home and in-store customer sessions.

Effective communication of your strategy is not really a matter of reports or annual company conferences; it takes place in the thousands of smaller meetings, conversations and discussions that you have each year. Each is an opportunity to move your strategy forwards and should not be missed. Here are three actions you can take today:

1. Plan to link *all* your meetings and conversations with your key strategic objectives, so that people get the message about what's important.
2. Build a list of stories and examples from across the company that highlight the direction you are pursuing and what you want the organisation to achieve. Make these stories simple, emotional and grounded in the reality of the business.
3. Identify and implement changes to your own behaviour and decision-making that will highlight to others the essence of your strategic direction.

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