

Practical Communication

How to translate this good idea from theory into practice within organisations

Practical communication is an obvious good idea that often stays that way – just a good idea. This article clarifies what the term means and outlines ways of putting it into action in communication with staff.

Organisations today recognise that they need to communicate with their people. Increasing amounts of time and money are being invested in new ways of reaching people and giving them access to information. What if all this effort is being wasted?

Any communication is not better than no communication. To be worth doing it has to be done properly. It needs to be practical.

Practical communication has a concrete objective. Energy and resources are directed towards making something specific happen.

Practical communication is adapted to the real world in which it must work. It is shaped to take account of the audience (the way they want to receive information and the way they will use it), your budget, your timetable – and your objective.

Practical communication takes something that's a theoretical "good thing" and turns it into something that achieves real results. If you want to use communication as a tool to help your organisation, make sure that it's shaped and put to work in the right way – make sure it's practical.

There are four factors you need to address if you want to achieve practical communication:

1. Context

Practical communication takes into account the physical and non-physical context in which the communication will be presented and used. What is the general mood in the organisation? What else is happening or has just happened? How will the communication be used, not just now but over the long term?

Example:

You want front line staff to understand how the principles of customer service translate into real activity. People need real examples that reflect what they do, but your organisation is constantly changing and different teams do different kinds of work. The practical communication solution must be flexible. Use computer-based training materials that can be updated cheaply and quickly, and easily adapted to create different versions. Provide a format and approach for discussion of practical examples within teams, rather than spelling them out for people.

2. Resources

When looking at resources, the focus is usually on budget. That's important, but you also need to consider the human resources you need. What people do you have available to develop and implement your communication programme? Are there people involved with sufficient power and influence to make the project happen?

Example:

You need to train your sales force about a new product. You can't take them off the road for long periods. You don't have the budget or the trainers available for lengthy, centralised training sessions. The practical communication solution might include:

Distance learning materials that your sales people can use during and in-between their day-to-day work

Training tools for line managers that enable them to support the training of their teams.

3. Audience

Good communication takes into account its audience – how do the people you are trying to reach think, feel and work? What sort of media would they prefer and find easiest to use? What would be the most appropriate style and words? If you want practical communication you need to go further and consider what is it you want people to *do*. Only then can you shape and deliver tools that will help them to do it.

Example:

You want to introduce a new marketing planning process. Your marketing people find processes “boring” and “difficult”. Your practical communication solution might combine:

- Tools linked to everyday activities that make the process easy to use
- A powerful internal brand to capture attention and make the process attractive
- Engaging launch events to create momentum and build networks and team spirit.

4. Benefits

There are two sides to the benefits ‘coin’. Side 1: People do things that they believe will benefit them – and they need proof of this benefit. Practical communication focuses on the “what’s in it for me?”: on the day-to-day benefits people will get from the communication. Side 2: There is no point investing resources in something that will not bring your organisation real benefits.

Example:

You want to build relationships with key distributors. Your competitors are trying to do the same. Their approach is to distribute information about their products. The practical approach, however, would be to provide materials and support that would help your distributors achieve their goals. By helping them, you will build a better relationship – and see a subsequent rise in the overall sales of your products. Make sure that your efforts are focused where they will bring the greatest possible return for your organisation.

Things to think about:

- The best hammer in the world is no use if you want to dig a hole.
- Innovation is the ability to turn creative ideas into something that works in practice.
- Success doesn’t come from doing something but from doing it right.
- The key to good, practical communication is an understanding of people.
- Theories alone don’t bring results.

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Zero-21 is a consultancy that improves what and how you communicate – enabling you to bring your ideas to life and get the results you want. The person behind Zero-21 is Lynn Fraser, a writer and communication consultant with over 15 years’ experience in corporate identity, marketing, selling, internal communication and training.



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