



Communication Brief

Four Classic Editions



Communication Brief

Tips on employee research and communication

Headlines this dull won't get anyone's attention

If you want employees to read what you send them, you need to write good headlines. Here's how advertisers do it:

- **Appeal to self-interest** – Get your main selling point into the headline.
- **Provide news** – Announce something new and different.
- **Arouse curiosity** – Make a statement that entices the reader to learn more.
- **Suggest quick and easy** – Claim there is a faster, simpler way to do something.

Remember: Most people will spend only a few seconds – while distracted by something else – deciding whether to read your message. Think like an advertiser to give yourself an advantage.

Get more out of employee focus groups

Focus groups can yield rich insights – if conducted correctly. For good results, be sure to:

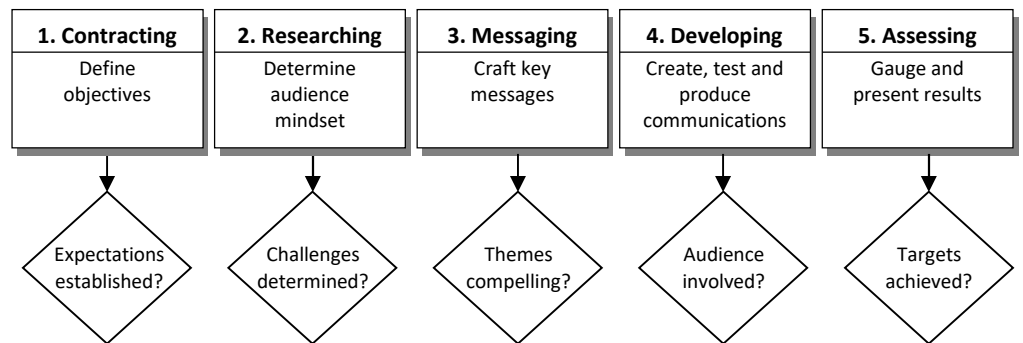
- **Include 8 to 12** participants.
- **Organize topics** from general to specific.
- Ask only **open-ended, non-leading** questions.
- **Avoid using jargon** and any other language that might be unclear.
- **Don't ask "why,"** as doing so can elicit false replies. Probe thoughts and feelings instead.

Need a model that reviews the key stages of a communication campaign? Consider the change communication model below (for a full-size version go to www.ahscommunications.com/resources.html).

The model describes the critical steps at each stage in the communication process, activities associated with each step and checkpoints to assess progress.

The time you spend completing each step should match the importance of the communication. To avoid re-work later, however, resist the urge to skip ahead to Step 4 until you have defined your objectives, audience mindset and key messages.

Change Communication Model



ACTIVITIES

Identify what needs to be accomplished.	Define what your target audience currently believes about issues related to the change.	Craft persuasive messages that reinforce positive beliefs, counter negative beliefs and enhance people's understanding.	Plan communication approach and tactics.	Measure impact of the change, reactions and opportunities to enhance perceptions.
Determine whom you wish to reach.	Identify the values and perceptions driving those beliefs.	Express each message in terms of a theme, a summary statement and supporting evidence (e.g., facts, statistics, etc.)	Create prototype communications.	Present results to those leading the change effort.
Decide what your target audience should know, feel and do.	Outline likely challenges to your message.		Test prototypes with target audiences.	Supplement communication as necessary.
			Revise communications as necessary.	
			Obtain approvals and finalize deliverables.	
			Communicate the change.	



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Quick Ways to Make Your Message More Persuasive

Use the techniques below to increase the credibility and influence of your message.

- **Align your ideas with theirs.** People will judge your opinion based on the attitudes and beliefs they already hold, so help them make the connection. If your ideas seem to reinforce their worldview, they will be more likely to accept your position.
- **Address counterarguments in your message.** Doing so shows you are aware of opposing views and provides the opportunity for you to refute them before they are raised by others.
- **Keep it fresh.** Don't just reiterate the same tired arguments people have already heard. Instead, offer fresh evidence – e.g., news, analysis, opinions – to get others to listen.
- **Include testimonials from credible sources.** Whenever possible, inject supporting opinions from credible or seemingly unbiased people. This suggests your views are objective and that you have done your homework.
- **Give parallel examples.** Show how what you are advocating has worked at a competitor or a respected company in another industry.
- **Emphasize benefits (not features).** Feature: what something can do. Benefit: how it helps you.
- **Get to the heart of the matter.** Cut through the complexity with a simple summation of your argument.

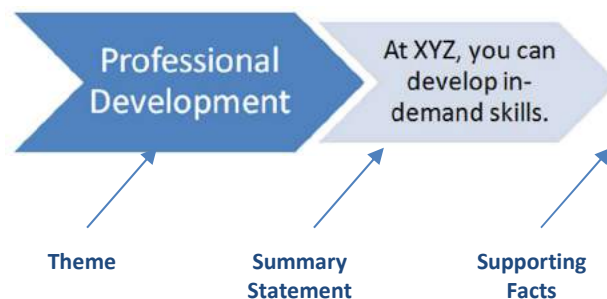
Do This Before You Communicate an Important Change

To come up with the right messages when communicating change, you will want to gather information from two key stakeholder groups: people who need to change and people necessary to implement the change. Start with the issues below.

Consider stakeholders'...	By probing...
Current perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of current state • Prevalent beliefs and attitudes • Satisfaction with status quo
Likely reaction to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived gains and improvements • Potential drawbacks and takeaways • Issues and concerns
Communication advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggested actions to take • Insights into what works and what doesn't • Potential derailers

How to Organize Key Messages

To structure key messages, it's helpful to organize them in terms of themes, summary statements and supporting facts. The diagram below shows a key message XYZ Company wants to convey to job candidates for scientific positions. The theme is "professional development," which the company's research suggests is appealing to the target audience. Notice how XYZ sums up the theme in one clear statement and backs up the statement with compelling facts, each of which can then be fleshed out further.



1. We routinely make "best employer" lists for professional development.
2. Every scientist here receives a minimum of 100 hours of training annually.
3. Our operations span four continents, and scientists often take on cross-border assignments.
4. We use cutting-edge technology.
5. We tackle some of the toughest challenges in our industry.

The company will need to organize its other key messages similarly. After doing so, it will be ready to communicate and reinforce the messages through print and online channels, presentations and one-on-one discussions.

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Quick Ways to Improve Your Next Employee Communication Campaign

- **Sum up your communication strategy** in one sentence.
- **Determine what you want** people to know, feel and do.
- **Be provocative.** Try something new or unexpected.
- **Know your audience,** including their concerns and motivations.
- **Keep your message simple.** It's more likely to be skimmed than studied.
- **Use words and pictures** to reinforce key messages.
- **Consider what would persuade you** to change your beliefs or take action.
- **Avoid hyperbole** and rosy descriptions, which suggest propaganda.
- **Be specific.** The more specific the message, the more credible.
- **Make it personal.** Include illustrative examples or testimonials.
- **Speak plainly,** without jargon and clichéd expressions.

Do Your Communications Hit the Mark?

Before you distribute an important communication, conduct a pilot test in person or by phone. It's an easy way to enhance your product and gauge potential reactions. Here's how to do it.

Before the pilot test – identify and invite participants



Select about 10 people who represent the communication's target audience and send them an invitation like the one below.

"You have been selected to participate in a discussion concerning an upcoming communication about [Topic]. The discussion will be held on [Date, Time, Place]. If you are able to attend, please confirm by replying to this invitation. You'll then be sent a draft communication to review. Nothing more will be asked of you after the discussion concludes. We hope you can attend and look forward to hearing from you."

During the pilot test – hold a focused discussion



Use the discussion guide below, modified as necessary, to gather feedback. It's best if the discussion facilitator is not the author of the communication.

Thank you for taking the time to join us. I'm [Name] and will lead today's discussion. Before I ask for your reaction to the communication you received, I need to review three things:

- First, there are no right or wrong answers to anything we will discuss. It's all personal opinion, so please be candid and say whatever you think and feel.
- Second, I will report common views and perceptions to the communication's sponsor, but I will not identify anyone's personal comments.
- And lastly, the communication you received is still in draft form. The final version will incorporate today's feedback and may look different.

Any questions before we begin? Okay, let me start by asking...

1. What's your general reaction to the communication?
2. What, if any, concerns do you have after reading it?
3. What, if any, content do you find confusing or unclear?
4. What should be added, deleted or modified to improve the communication in any way?
5. Under ordinary circumstances, how much of this communication might you read?
6. What action, if any, would you take after reading this communication?
7. Considering everything, how can we improve this communication?

Before we break, does anyone have any final comments about anything we discussed?

After the pilot test – report results



Draft a brief report that summarizes participants' overall impressions, likely reactions, sources of concern and confusion, and suggestions for improvement.

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Employee Focus Groups: Best Done in Person

You can conduct employee focus groups over the phone – sometimes that's the only sensible way to bring together remote employees. Meeting in person, however, provides a better way to gather information, as doing so helps you:

- **Build rapport.** Being in a room with participants, compared to hearing a set of disembodied voices on the telephone, creates a more intimate environment for discussion. It also fosters group interaction.
- **Lead the conversation.** In person, it's easier to cut off ramblers, engage quiet people, deter dominant participants and clarify remarks before others chime in. Your physical presence also encourages people to join the discussion and not multi-task.
- **Gauge nonverbal behavior.** If psychologist Albert Mehrabian is right, 55% of communication concerning attitudes and feelings is nonverbal. So there's no substitute for witnessing people's body language and facial expressions.
- **Judge group dynamics.** Being there live lets you experience how people respond to each other and assess the overall mood in the room. Are heads nodding in agreement? Do people seem tense or angry? Your observations provide context for people's comments.

Employee communication campaigns typically proceed through five phases. The key to succeeding at each phase is knowing what questions to ask, since the answers will shape your communication strategies. The chart below shows key issues to consider at each step in the process.

Questions to Ask at Each Phase of Communication

1. Contracting

- What needs to be communicated?
- Why is it important?
- What are the implications?

2. Researching

- Who is the target audience?
- What do they currently think?
- What would you like them to think?

3. Messaging

- What's the single most persuasive message to change people's attitudes?
- What information will reinforce positive beliefs, counter negative beliefs or enhance understanding?

4. Developing

- What's the best way to reach the target audience?
- What is the purpose of each planned communication tactic?
- What does the target audience think of our draft communications?

5. Assessing

- What was achieved through the communication campaign?
- How were the communications perceived?
- What messages still need to be reinforced?



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