

Give employees basic information in face-to-face meetings during times of major change

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES DURING A MERGER

**There's no shortage of misleading beliefs about merger communication. For example, the myth that content-free communication is better than no communication at all. Andy Szpekman takes a more logical approach to change campaigns.**

Here are 10 principles to follow when communicating during a merger or any other major change.

**1. Talk less and listen more:** Don't rely on formal corporate communication. Their influence is extremely limited. Instead, put 80 percent of your energy into two-way, face-to-face communication, including focus groups with employees, town hall meetings with senior leaders and messages for supervisors to share with teams.

**2. Separate facts from reassurance:** Every good crisis communicator knows this. Say what's known, what's not known and what's being done, but don't speculate to make people feel better or you will erode your credibility.

**3. Ditch the vain attempts to spin the message:** People will quickly recognize the facts for what they are, and your interpretation will appear out of touch or dishonest.

**4. Tell it all... all at once:** Letting bad news trickle out slowly breeds distrust and creates anxiety. Employees demand to hear bad news right away.

**5. Hone messages into clear, simple statements:** Corporate communications are blunt instruments. Nuance and subtlety are completely ignored. If you want your message to be understood, you must say it plainly, directly and

succinctly. No one is reading or listening to corporate messages for the pure joy of the experience.

Moreover, for most employees, context equals clutter. People just want to know what's changing, what they need to do differently and what it means for them. They don't want to see the principles that guided the decision, the link to the broad strategy or the obligatory references to shareholder value. They tune this stuff out, and it dilutes the message.

**6. Strive to reduce uncertainty and instill a sense of control:** The people in charge always know far more than everyone else. No one believes the oft-heard phrase, "we promise to tell you what we know when we know it," because it's rarely true.

Management's instinct is to wait until all decisions are final and then convey the news to employees. Meanwhile, rumors fill the void. A better approach is to explain what's being decided, what the issues are, where things might be headed and the timetable for decisions – while clarifying that the final outcome could be very different from what's being suggested now.

This approach not only reduces the distracting level of uncertainty brought out by major change, but also makes staff feel like informed participants on the change journey.

**7. Let people arrive at conclusions themselves:** If you try to suggest what others should think or feel, they'll challenge your assumptions. If you want people to think a new process is simple, work to make the process simple. Telling someone, "you're going to think the new process is really simple" actually works against you. It leads people to think, oh yeah? It's like saying, "I'm now going to tell you a funny

joke." Nothing ruins a joke more than announcing it as a funny joke.

**8. Keep senior leaders visible:** The mood at headquarters may not be representative of the mood throughout the company. Leaders need to get out and gauge employee attitudes across the organization. Also, because leaders will think the merger integration is "old news" before anyone else does, they need encouragement to keep hammering home important messages.

**9. Reassure high-performing employees of their value:** Simple reassurance and a warm welcome to the restructured organization can be as motivating to the people you want to keep as financial incentives to stay.

**10. Measure performance outcomes and monitor employee reaction:** Don't wait until it's too late to learn the change isn't going well. Develop an internal and external listening approach to learn what people are saying and create a rapid-response plan for addressing important issues as they surface.

By following these principles will you head off all staff discontent during a merger? Of course not. If people are losing their jobs or experiencing massive disruption, they aren't going to like it. But these principles do increase your odds of success. By following them, you'll help employees manage the transition, open up lines of communication and position executives to support the change. scm



**Andy Szpekman** is President of AHS Communications, which provides HR and communication research, strategies and tools to improve business performance. Szpekman can be reached at [andy@ahscommunications.com](mailto:andy@ahscommunications.com)