



# Through the Lens of 10 Global Leaders

A Qualitative Perspective on  
BEST-IN-CLASS PRACTICES IN EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

April 2014

Keith Burton,  
Brunswick Group,  
New York

Gary Grates,  
W20 Group,  
New York

Colleen Learch,  
KRC Research,  
Washington, D.C.

On behalf of the Institute for Public Relations, a special thanks to all who contributed to this comprehensive research project examining global best-in-class practices in employee communication:

**Commission on Organizational Communication:**

**Keith Burton**

*Principal*

Grayson Emmett Partners (Chair)

**Dr. Bruce Berger**

*Professor Emeritus - Advertising & Public Relations*

University of Alabama

**Gary Grates**

*Principal*

W2O Group

**Peter Debreceeny**

*Consultant*

Gagen MacDonald

**Frank Ovaitt**

*President & CEO*

Institute for Public Relations

**Research Steering Committee:**

**Chris Olson**

*Assistant Vice President - Internal Communication*

USAA

**Ruth Weber Kelley**

*Head - Global Internal Communication*

Cargill

**Lisa Hartenberger**

*Director - Corporate Communications*

Navistar

**Tyler Durham**

*Partner & Managing Director*

Ketchum Change

**Rebecca Edwards**

*Chief Communications Officer*

GE Oil & Gas

**External Research Partner:**

**KRC Research**

**Project Sponsors:**

**Gary Sheffer**

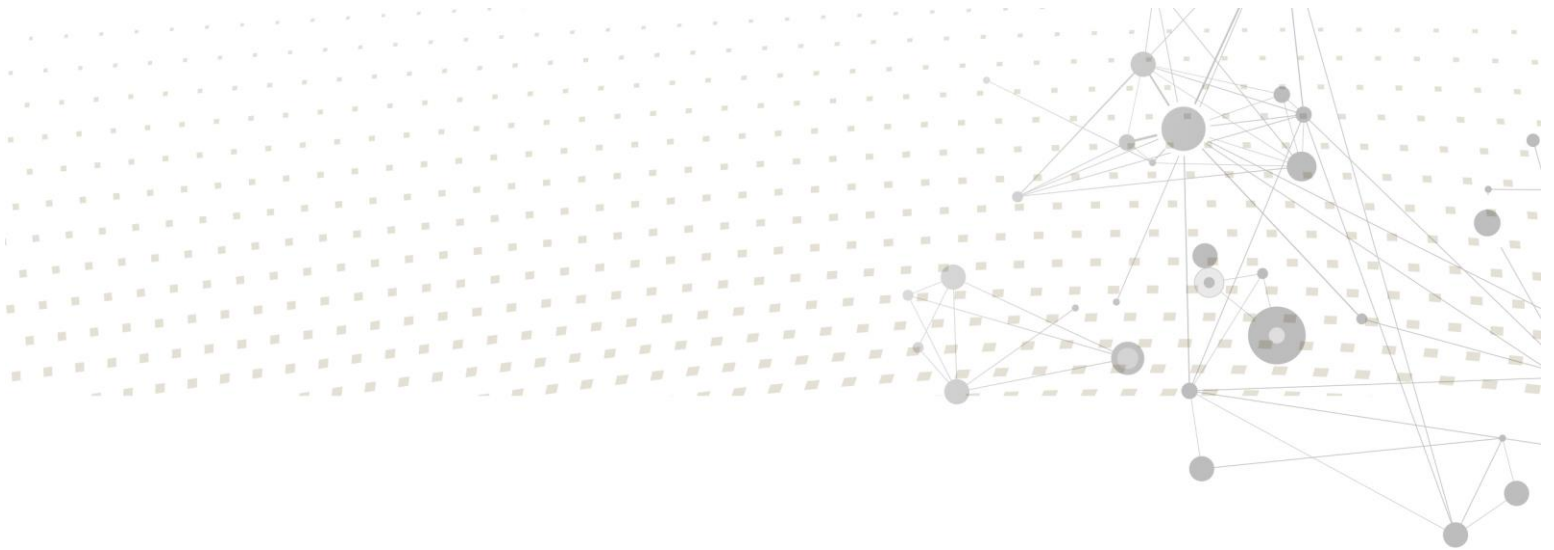
*Vice President - Corporate Communications & Public Affairs*

General Electric

**Jim Spangler**

*Vice President & Chief Communications Officer*

Navistar



## Context for Assessing Best-in-Class Practices Among Leaders

*“People only have so much bandwidth today. Employees are being challenged on a whole bunch of different levels. Every day, they have to make decisions about how they spend discretionary time that they have over lunch hour or over their break. ‘Do I really want to watch this video interview with the chairman? Do I care about that?’ And so I think when employees have the opportunity to drive how they get information and how they share information, they’re going to be a lot more engaged than feeling like I’m on the receiving end of this very polished message from the organization. I think that’s where the real value is going to come from is because they get to drive the way they pursue information, share information, and have dialogue with their employees, have dialogue with their colleagues.”*

– Global Employee Communication Leader

In a domestic refinery of a global oil company that co-author Keith Burton served as a client, front-line managers receive an average of 120 emails daily, three to five overnight voice mails providing operational updates, and requests for multiple meetings and teleconferences – all before they’re able to break loose in their shift to engage their most critical audience: direct reports. “We’re gagging on data and starving for information.” This declaration, once uttered by an IBM manager during its most challenging period of reengineering at the time of its near-death experience in the 1990s, still is



true. In its seminal 2012 report on leadership, The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations found that more than 4,500 practitioners in 23 countries rated the speed and flow of information, and managing the digital revolution and the rise of social media, as two of the most important issues in our field today. As one global employee communication leader we interviewed said of her company: “140,000 people don’t have the time, energy or bandwidth to care about 75 different business units. They want to have meaning and focus.”

How do we meet the growing demand for helping our leaders make sure everyone “gets” the business objectives while driving awareness, understanding, alignment and action? If we’ve ever had it, how do we keep our seat at the table? How do we address the growing generational differences driving engagement among employees? With the dizzying array of tools and channels now available, how do we cut through the clutter to discover what really matters to employees? And how do we track and measure internal communication to show we’re making a real difference?

Advancing the first of three major research topics identified by its Commission on Organizational Communication, the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in 2012 engaged KRC Research to conduct in-depth interviews with internal communication professionals at GE, FedEx, Johnson & Johnson, Cargill, Chevron, Navistar, McDonald’s, IBM, Petrobras and Toyota. The goal of the qualitative research was to better understand internal communication methods and practices in global organizations. But we learned so much more.

KRC Research developed a draft Interview Guide following discussions with Commission members, then vetted and adjusted the Guide through additional reviews. The final Guide was used in each of the one-hour telephone interviews that followed. Commission members selected the 10 companies participating in the study based on the companies’ global scope and their perceived effectiveness in internal communication. These 10 companies are often on most-admired or best-places-to-work lists, and they have sustained market leadership positions in the dynamic global market. Their internal communication programs also are often recognized for excellence, as evidenced in awards they receive and the extent to which they are profiled in conference presentations and professional publications, among other forms of recognition. Interview participants included one senior communication officer in each of the 10 companies. The interviews are not only important in their own right, but especially for the guidance they will provide in developing a related quantitative survey during the next phase of work that is now beginning with KRC Research.

Through these interviews, KRC Research uncovered the mechanisms, tools, and techniques that world-class companies employ for addressing everyday challenges, as well as looming or real crises. It also learned how companies approach hot topics within internal communication, such as digitization, talent retention, strategic planning, diverse languages, and establishing common knowledge

Contributing to the observed success of these companies are the following factors:

1. An organizational structure that connects internal communicators with the rest of the company—up and down the chain of command;
2. An innate understanding that strong internal communication will have a positive return for the brand and the company that need not be proven at every juncture;
3. An arsenal of tools and practices for both listening and communicating a message; and
4. A strong commitment to keeping employees across the company informed in a timely fashion, often before stories break in mass media and digital channels.

Putting their effectiveness aside, co-author Colleen Learch and her team at KRC Research observed that this group faces challenges common to all companies, are subject to many of the same pitfalls and problems that any company could face, and will admit to room for improvement in the work they do.

## Inside 10 Leading Global Companies

We've organized this white paper to provide a sharp, cutting view of today's world of global employee communication as seen through the lens of 10 leading practitioners. They've helped us understand the context of their work; their approach to communications; best-in-class practices they employ for success; how they measure the effectiveness of their programs; and real-world considerations for calculating a return.

And so we begin with a summary of "10 from 10" – the best-in-class practices that may set leaders apart from the pack:

### 1. Be a business leader first, a communicator second ("How do we make money?")

To be truly successful, internal communicators (and we would hasten to add *all* communicators) must be seen as business people first, with an expertise in communications. Senior executives consider it a given that communicators are skilled at their craft in the leading companies. They're looking for communications partners to serve as trusted advisors delivering timely and proactive counsel in support of business objectives. As one leader reminded us: "Ours is a relationship business. You don't want that first touch point with a leader to be, 'Hey, I have a communications issue.'"

*"Communications people have to be business people first. One of the interesting things I've observed over my couple of decades in corporate communications is that I think initially communications people felt they were reporters. Those days are long gone. "*

*“I think what you’re really striving for isn’t to be a support function for the business, it is to be a partner to the business...”*

*“We are business leaders first, communicators second. And the objective isn’t the best internal communication plan, or the best program on a specific project. Our job when we come in everyday is: How do we help the organization sell more trucks, sell more engines, as competitively and at the highest margins possible?”*

## 2. Begin with the end in mind -- remembering it’s all about the “Why?”

An organization must be able to clearly and concisely articulate the purpose and value of change for its future success and for the employees. This includes the business benefits, but also the changed culture, business practices and the environment envisioned. By building a shared purpose, collaborative communities can seek a new basis for trust and organizational cohesion that transcends self-interest, is more flexible than old models, and is less reliant on the charismatic appeal of a Jack Welch- or a Steve Jobs-styled executive leader. FedEx has a shared purpose that its employees have known intimately throughout its 42-year history: “People – Service – Profit (PSP).” Globally, FedEx employees live this mantra – “You get the right people, you train them appropriately, you look after them, and they deliver at a level of service that is outstanding. That then gives you a return in terms of profit that you’re able to re-invest back into the businesses and the workplaces...”

*“We’re intentional about what we do and how we do it, so our communications planning is very proactive: Where, from a business and culture standpoint, do we want to be in the next 12 months, 18 months, two years, five years? And then put plans in play that enable us to get there...”*

*“We have three priority business objectives in 2013 as a company. One, to improve quality. Secondly, to [help] meet very critical product launches. And third is pretty broad, and that’s delivering on the 2013 operating plan.”*

*“At the end of the day, the thing that is really driving your communications agenda is your culture. It has to be a part of your shared purpose.”*

*“Our goal is to build corporate reputation within...ultimately that drives us.”*

*“We understand that to successfully execute the turnaround, we need to give people the four or five key metrics. ‘Guys, if we hit them, we’ll be successful in 2013 – 2014.’ So we’re working with the strategy team to finalize what those are and driving alignment around that; getting business plans for the years to come...I think that’s a big opportunity for us.”*

### 3. Challenge – don't "cheerlead" – employees

The workplace is shifting from experienced, reliable Baby Boomers to savvy, demanding Gen X, Gen Y and Millennial generation employees who are becoming more "democratized" through the explosion inside companies of social media, online communities and employee affinity groups. The new, collaborative communities we see ascending in the workplace share a distinctive set of values that Paul Adler of USC's Marshall School of Business refers to as an "ethic of contribution." They want – and expect – to be challenged. This ethic of contribution means going above and beyond the normal job performance to deliver a higher discretionary effort. In pharmaceutical and healthcare companies like Janssen and Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, the focus of engagement and internal communication is on how teams redefine work and results, and communicating higher shared performance objectives as these organizations restructure for greater efficiency and innovation. Their resolve is to set their corporate brands apart in an industry sector that has fallen precipitously in its trust rankings in recent years.

*"[Employees] want to have meaning in what they do. I mean, we spend way too many hours of our life at work to let it be just a transactional relationship. And people want to think they're making a difference. So you need to have 'line of sight' – what is the bigger picture that I'm plugging into, and then it needs to be localized."*

*"Our employees demand a lot...[They're] emotionally connected to the company, so they demand a lot from internal communications, and, of course, we believe it's important to expand this relationship in order to achieve engagement."*

*"Our role is getting people [to the point] where we get out of the business of pushing communications out, and get people and groups together to be able to share knowledge...I think if we start viewing ourselves more as behaviorists as opposed to just [being] communicators – that's a really exciting evolution that is taking place."*

*"We select 20 people from all over the company and take them to visit one of our units – not just the operating unit but also the social projects that we sponsor and the people we support. It's a program that helps the people connect themselves with the company -- not just the area they work in – to perceive the company as a whole and to engage them, motivate them to see the company in a different way."*

### 4. Create a roadmap for change, but expect detours on the road ahead

Successful organizations develop a clear, measurable path to the desired future state in their drive to create a shared purpose. A shared purpose is meaningless, however, if people with different skills and responsibilities can't contribute to it and to one another. The key mechanism of a collaborative community is a process for



aligning the shared purpose within and across projects – i.e., creating interdependent processes. Toyota innovated a process known as *kaizen*, and its lean manufacturing model (and way of operating) became a standard many of the world's great companies follow to this day. In "The Toyota Way," it's the people who bring the system to life: working, communicating, resolving issues, and growing together. It encourages, supports, and, in fact, demands employee involvement.

Beyond the Toyota example, others have adopted process mapping, formal techniques for brainstorming, participatory meeting management and decision-making with multiple stakeholders. As communications strategists, it's essential that we help our companies build the roadmap for change and communicate it in a more integrated, creative way, whether through dynamic storytelling, strategic learning maps, digital signage or online communities.

Just as important as having a direction is recognizing the many shifts and turns along the way. Alignment is neither easy nor linear; ironically, being prepared for bumps in the road will accelerate the journey.

*"My role is to help our employees understand the corporate strategies, understand some of the things that are part and parcel to the culture, the importance of the health environment and safety in our organization, the importance of doing things under the guise of the 'Chevron Way.'"*

*"You need to help your employees understand how they fit and why they matter. And it comes down to their level of engagement at the end of the day."*

*"We all want our system – that is, members of the organization – to understand what we are doing and accomplishing. It helps us drive results and share the strengths of the company. Knowledge is power in the system. Having an engaged work force is a happier and more productive work force. People want to feel good about the company that they work for."*

*"How do we make sure that employees feel like there's something here that they want to stick with? Once they've joined [our company], and we've invested time in training them, and they know the organization, how do we work on things such as personal development, career development? How do we help their managers understand the importance of having those development conversations so that employees understand, 'Wow this is a company that's really looking out for my growth on a professional level,' and move them on to the next role so that ultimately we end up retaining that talent."*



## 5. Build a detailed internal stakeholder map

Each employee constituency has a different concern, and a different role in supporting change. Creating an internal stakeholder map that better integrates employees while identifying and highlighting special needs of leaders, front-line employees, sales professionals, customer support teams, functional support personnel and others, will have a greater influence on how audiences react to a change and the messaging we've created. Since its adoption as a principal of the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Model advanced by the Medill School at Northwestern University more than two decades ago, stakeholder mapping has increasingly driven a more focused approach for how we engage employees and communicate in more meaningful ways. IBM, Dow Chemical, Schneider Electric, GE, FedEx and Cargill are just a few examples of corporations that drive deeply to understand what their people want and need from internal communication.

The key is focusing on your audience. As FedEx' global employee communication leader said recently: "It's not social media needs. It's not Facebook. It's not Twitter. It's not LinkedIn. It's the *audience*. What does the audience need to be engaged and effective? That's what we focus on."

*"In terms of how we structure our goals [for employee communication], we structure it by audience – starting with our top six leaders, working down to our top 35 leaders and articulating goals for them. We articulate goals for our top 250 leaders. We articulate goals for our employees, for functions, for business units. So we've found that to be quite a useful construct for figuring out the goals specifically that we have for each of those audiences."*

*"Some people that work for you hate you and some people love you no matter what you do. But it's that sort of silent majority in the middle that you really have to worry about, and engage."*

*"...you have to be much more focused on plant superintendents and plant HR leaders, and you really have to figure out what the person within this operation needs to know about Cargill..."*

## 6. Don't vacate your seat at the table; *advocate* a point of view:

Having internal communicators involved in the conversations that shape change before decisions are made will enable effective implementation and adoption from the beginning. In our experience, *involving* them means more than communicating after-the-fact. It means taking our seat at the table with leaders so that communicators can help shape decisions and the communication that will follow. But there is a price to pay: communicators must come prepared and have a point of view that they actively voice.

*“Communications has to be at the table. One thing I particularly love about this company is that I’m at the table. It’s got less to do with how many stripes I have on my sleeve, but rather the contribution I can make in being a conscience of the company and in supporting our business objectives and our culture.”*

*“Communications is at the table. It’s at the decision-making table. It’s at the planning table. It’s at the research table. It’s part and parcel to the way things are done at FedEx. It’s not an after-thought, which would turn us into a reactionary organization.”*

## 7. Adopt an authentic voice

Sustainability and green-friendly practices are still *in*, but they are no longer *it*. Today’s employees are looking for total values alignment with their employer, and environmental stewardship alone is no longer sufficient. Authenticity – which calls for demonstrating integrity, telling employees the truth even if the news is bad, being consistent in what is said and done internally and externally, and acting in an honest, trustworthy way – is the new “green” among best-in-class companies. Creating opportunities for dialogue, feedback mechanisms, and face-to-face conversations ensures that employee concerns and constructive ideas are heard and incorporated into future plans and messaging.

*“[On our intranet,] we now have completely attributed commenting. We were a bit concerned about what kind of effect that would have on the organization and on people’s willingness to comment. But people really hung in there. That’s a huge sign of engagement for me – people’s willingness to engage on a topic and be candid about their perspective.”*

*“I’m fortunate to have a workforce that is extremely proud of the work they do; they feel the company is being honest with them. Whenever there’s a crisis we immediately get out, we get in front of it, and we go to our employees and explain it and they feel as if the company has credibility because we address things with them.”*

## 8. The power of line-of-sight managers as communicators

Despite the near dizzying array of channels and communication events in companies today, for most employees, line-of-sight management through their direct supervisor remains the most trusted resource for information. We know this through years of research and the audits of preferred channels among hundreds of companies. Empowering key leaders and front-line managers to deliver messages is essential. Simply put – any significant change effort will fail without them. “Our leadership, particularly our front line managers are about the most effective channel we have. Our investment is increasingly in them – and the tools and training them in the skills they have for delivery,” says one best-in-class company.

*“While we can’t serve the needs of every single leader directly in the organization through our own personal support, we’ve gotten very good at providing our leadership team with what they need to be disciples of communication in their own individual areas.”*

*“We’ll schedule interviews with business unit leaders to find out what they’re thinking, what the top-of-mind issues are. Those really end up becoming pretty significant opportunities to mine: What are their perspectives? Are the communications effective? Are the leaders who are sharing information doing a good job in terms of targeting the right level of information; and whether it’s for employees or for leaders?”*

*“So while I’m not responsible for the strategic plan, our leaders don’t know how to give people visibility to the strategic plan. And we do. We were able to craft these ‘inside’ sessions. We dedicated an enormous amount of time and energy to it, and they and our finance guys and our strategy guys partnered with us. And we successfully, in the course of one month, delivered this four-hour, half-day training session to over 1,000 people. We’re not going to educate 15,000 people on strategy. The 1,000 people that we trained [to deliver strategy] now have an obligation to go and engage.”*

*“We still believe in the power of face-to-face, I think particularly in this era where people are just overwhelmed with everything electronic. The way to really build understanding and to help them internalize things is through interaction with our leaders. Our leaders are very active – being out with employees, making visits to locations all over the world, and being very open to transparent Q&A with our employees at every level.”*

## 9. Content – and content *strategy* – is king

The internal communicators tell us they relentlessly reinforce key messages and the path forward. They keep key messages at the forefront of all communications and in every vehicle. If messages start to feel stale, they say, we must remember that sticking to them is essential to maintaining understanding and gaining commitment from all employees. Sometimes, that also means being more provocative to create interest and build engagement.

Finally – if you think your company controls the message in this brave new world, think again. Employees increasingly are driving communication at *their* levels. So we need to join with them in the conversations, or risk being left behind.

*“We have numerous competing priorities, business plans, objectives, multiple audiences, doing very different things. It’s really the role of the various communications teams, and often ours, to pull all of that together and tell a consistent story. The way we do that is by optimizing a fairly consistent approach to*

*developing and executing communications that doesn't constrain creativity; but rather ensures the alignment we seek with business plans and objectives."*

*"Sometimes [our communication] is like different voices talking to the same people. 'Who is Petrobras? Local Petrobras? Or corporate Petrobras?' And sometimes we have more than two or three levels communicating to the same people. This is a problem we figured out long ago, and we're trying to reduce these different 'voices' talking about Petrobras to the employees. And this is one great problem we're working on – excess of communication. We need less with more focus, more relevance to the people."*

*"We want to create communications that inspire and encourage our employees to help achieve those core objectives."*

*"The audience's ability to reconcile and relate to the headline is generally based on consistency. Delivering message architecture at the front end of the business year can carry you through in a consistent fashion. You get a much better return, in terms of team member engagement."*

## 10. The price of measurement

*"What's the total cost of engagement and internal communication?" "What are the fixed and the variables?" "Am I getting a ROI?" "What is the baseline?" Our interviews tell us that best-in-class companies relentlessly track and measure strategies, tactics and channels. They intentionally treat their employees like customers. They do process checks on how the message is getting through, and they conduct communications effectiveness surveys. They ask important questions: "Are our messages getting through?" "Are people acting on them?" "How is that message affecting their view of the company, or the level of advocacy they have on the company?" In the end, it must be effective and practical: "You can have very effective communication but at \$10,000 per person to play, it doesn't make sense," says one global best-in-class employee communicator.*

*"We have two main pieces of research. One is for employee satisfaction. And we have different research that measures the perception of the company's image with employees. And now we're introducing a measure for engagement [that will] help us know if the employee understands, identifies himself with the strategy. And we'll look at how the communication tools help him to understand and to identify himself and to engage."*

*"I measure our communications effectiveness and our communications efficiency...If we have a channel and it's operating at a below 30-percent effectiveness, a 30-percent importance and a 30-percent use rate – we'll put it on a watch and track it. If our strategies and tactics don't improve it, then we'll build a business case to eliminate it. From an efficiency standpoint, we also measure cost: What's the total cost of*

*communications? What are the fixed and variables? Am I getting a ROI? What's the baseline? We'll establish a baseline and operate off that baseline."*

*"It's a combination of quantitative and qualitative, and we have to be careful. There's survey overload because everyone is being driven now by measurement and we're really trying to move beyond anecdotal information to quantitative evaluation of our outcomes."*

*"We can see how many people are reading the daily story on our corporate Intranet. And people have the opportunity to rate those stories. So we can kind of see what's resonating with people. It provides interesting data for us in terms of what people want to see."*



# A Deeper Dive on What We Heard...

Beyond the best-in-class practices we identified, our group of communicators also shared their perspectives and views on a range of additional issues, needs and opportunities that influence their work as internal communications. Included are the following:

## The environment and structure of organizational communications within world-class companies

To begin, the organizations we selected for our interviews face a host of challenges and recent crises that are not unique to their status as global leaders, among them

- Structural challenges (global companies, multiple brands under one roof, matrixed organizations broad leadership);
- Workforce challenges (general fast pace of workforce, turf issues, employees not “playing” well with others, internal friction or in-fighting, language and cultural challenges, growing generational differences in the workplace);
- Media challenges (bad press, misinformation);
- Product challenges (product recalls, shortages, production challenges, distribution problems); and
- Marketplace challenges (competition).

And there was more. They’re challenged in delivering messages to employees. They experience difficulty in cutting through the clutter and regulating the volume of messages to employees. Like others, they struggle with enhancing executive visibility.

It’s common for these internal communicators to sit fairly high on the organizational chart. They often report in to the leader of corporate communications (vice president, senior vice president or chief, depending on corporate nomenclature) or a similar role, and sometimes the diversity of their role has them reporting to two senior leaders (especially when the individual is responsible for social media).

Our internal communicators have fairly robust teams, often with two to five areas reporting in to them. Some oversee departments of close to 20 people. Others have smaller teams, with fewer than 10 employees.

The larger geographic spread and number of brands under the parent company will influence the structure. Some internal communicators shared that they have responsibility at the corporate level, and network with regional communicators, but hold no responsibility for the regional outcomes or activities. Others hold a more integrated role.

## How corporate philosophy contributes to the success of internal communication

Leaders we interviewed say that elements of their corporate philosophy contribute heavily to effective internal communication. Why? Because as fundamental as having a seat at the table is, effective internal communication begins with shared values and viewpoints about both the company at-large and the way to communicate.

Unprompted, most internal communicators shared that they themselves, as well as their colleagues, believe deeply in the company, the brand, and what it represents. They would buy or use the product themselves, and they work there by choice. Simply put – they care about their company. They also care deeply about the employees throughout the company, and genuinely want to connect with them in a two-way fashion. And, this sentiment is part of the corporate philosophy: “Care for your corporate family!” Many share that the leadership feels this sentiment in return from the workforce. Workers care more about the company, about its leadership and about the growth of the business when they feel valued.

Many still remember those organizations in the 1990s that broke the historic covenant of lifetime employment during the sweeping periods of reengineering and restructuring. With the demand for knowledge workers (architects, scientists, engineers, chemists and financial analysts, for example) growing in certain industry sectors, some companies are now returning to the belief and practice of lifelong employment. Others subscribe to growth from within. This type of philosophy fuels the practice of caring for and nurturing employees, including keeping them informed and letting them be heard.

Those interviewed say that their company, as a whole, is not focused on constantly proving the value and return of strong internal communication. It’s known, understood, and witnessed in many ways even if it can’t exactly be quantified. Leadership innately believes that a more informed, more content workforce leads to higher productivity, more innovation, greater retention, better recruitment, builds the brand from inside, makes advocates out of employees, and is critical to growing the business.

## Approach to communicating internally: “We’re listening and we’re changing”

Communicating with employees across the company is a two-way process, and our best-in-class internal communicators see themselves as both the distributors and recipients of messages. When we think about communications and what makes them effective, it’s easy to default to the style and format of the message and dissemination. Our internal communicators say it’s as much about effective listening as it is distribution; in fact, many of the newer initiatives in their workplaces are designed to allow the workforce to share and leadership to listen. Much of the approach is also rooted in enabling the workforce to be a conduit for achieving the leadership team’s overall goals.



Best-in-class internal communicators build their strategy around the concept of two-way communication, with the listening component being central to that approach. Not only does listening inform – it’s a basis for determining the effectiveness of communication.

Listening posts are both formal and informal. Traditional channels such as focus groups and town halls are still relevant and utilized. Our communicators also tell us that there are individuals who have their fingers on the pulse and ears to the grounds of departments and can alert necessary parties to emerging issues. They can also detect when a message has gotten through. Johnson & Johnson uses select employees known as “Credo Champions” as front-line listeners and communicators. Navistar uses groups of 50 or fewer employees as “challenge teams” to test messaging and internal communication plans before rollout. With the adoption of social media internally, listening is increasingly becoming more digital, taking the form of online suggestion boxes, chat rooms, comment spaces and “jam” sessions that emulate the breakthrough model innovated by IBM.

In listening, the internal communicators share that it’s important to look for trends over time. A few stray comments on any given day might be meaningless, but a growing group of similar sentiments over the course of a year or even a few months is something worth noting. “A year ago, maybe it was two years ago, [the company] came up a lot lower on associate engagement than it ever has. So we had to step back and say, ‘What’s going on?’ We ended up setting up a committee, an associate committee, made up of a cross-section of people, and now we’re going back and addressing some of the issues that associates felt the company wasn’t being good at. But we shouldn’t have had to get to that point. We should have had an ongoing listening mechanism set up, and we really had never fumbled like that.”

Some internal communicators consider listening as a top piece of advice they’d offer to organizations looking to improve their approach to communicating across the company, and nearly all say that it contributes to their company’s success in this area.

## Finally – There’s Always Room for Improvement

The last component of the approach to internal communication can be styled as “remembering your own humility.” While these internal communicators certainly can be considered as best-in-class, they themselves are tough in evaluating their performances. All openly shared that there is room for improvement in what they do. They had a sharp awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and were not afraid to say, “We need to be better at that,” and “We don’t have all the answers.”

They attribute this to a few factors: The workforce environment itself is ever-changing, with growing and new demands almost daily. Since their audience is changing, internal communication must also evolve. The environment in which the company functions is also rapidly changing, and a strong company learns from their experience,

whether it's positive or negative (and especially in a crisis). Lastly, and simply, no company is ever perfect and therefore, there is always room for improvement.

Those internal communicators whose organization experienced a crisis in the past decade shared that the positive byproduct of the crisis was that it gave birth to a successful practice, procedure, or approach for future planning.

Perhaps the greatest focus on what's next or where improvement is needed is harnessing social media, either for internal purposes or external communications purposes. Companies know that this is a space of great importance, but, in many cases, do not yet know how to make sense of it for their own benefit.

Following are select areas our internal communicators called out for future improvement:

*"We stubbed our toe on the recall, and we've learned from that. We still have a ways to go, but basically, I think that the silver lining in that whole thing is that we have become a lot more responsive as a company."*

*"We don't have our arms around, completely, social media, but that's an area that we're piloting."*

*"(Social media) seems to be the Holy Grail: 'How do I turn this into the big thing?' and a lot of people have keeled over the communications ship to address social media needs."*

*"We need to leverage our size and scale to share common messages. Collaboration and alignment are things that we are improving on continually but it is challenging to do so."*

*"[Our PR company] is monitoring social media globally, and seeing what topics are trending and then they make suggestions on things [we] could do to be part of the conversation, instead of jumping in and saying, 'Hey, we have an announcement today.' So that's where I think it's all going."*

*"Social media is a really interesting phenomenon, and there's so much debate around whether it's really worthy. There's a lot of confusion because everybody wants the ROI, but it's not really a revenue-generating channel, it is a relationship-generating channel. It's really hard to get the marketing people and executives to sometimes understand [that] this isn't an immediate payback."*

*"We have our own internal version of Twitter, and other social media, and we've got to figure out how we also leverage them to carry messages. But as a backstop, how do we at least ensure that a consistent group of leaders across the organization understands what's going on?"*

## Common Practices in Communicating Internally

Internal communicators use various practices in their work. These practices tie back to an internal communication objective, fulfill a need for them, and ultimately help ensure they are listening—and that their message is heard.

### Practices address objectives and needs

These practices also help them address challenges that arise from having a complex organizational structure, communicating across diverse languages, digitizing their message, retaining employees, and recruiting the next generation of the workforce.

The following displays several communications objectives and the common practices associated with delivering on those objectives:

Objective	Practices
<b>SENDING A WELL-RECEIVED MESSAGE THAT IS INTERNALIZED AND ABSORBED</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attention paid to tone: Convey respect and appreciation with words.</li> <li>- Focus on content: Ensuring that the content of the message is relevant to the recipient and that the message itself conveys what is important and why the topic matters. One participant shared that a prior practice had been to simply forward on press releases after they went to the media. Employees did not know how to interpret the release, what to make of the information, or if it even related to them. A new practice of explaining the topic and reason for the release, what it meant to employees, and what they could expect helped make messages feel more relevant across the board.</li> </ul>
<b>STAY ON-MESSAGE WITH THE REST OF THE COMPANY/PRESENT A UNIFIED MESSAGE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consensus building: Gaining agreement and buy-in for an approach or action throughout the company.</li> <li>- Alignment behind mission: Utilizing mission to ground actions.</li> <li>- Messaging architecture: Alignment behind an adopted messaging architecture to guide communications.</li> <li>- Executive visibility: Some shared that they endeavored to have leadership visible and delivering messages where possible. If it is spoken from leadership, it feels more applicable and more universal. There are challenges with this, of course, mainly being availability given intense schedules.</li> </ul>
<b>TARGETING MESSAGES/MANAGING FLOW OF INFORMATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Subject line conventions: Utilizing tags that signal prominence: Important information, breaking news, nice-to-know, of interest regularly can signal an employee as to what is essential to read, and what can wait.</li> <li>- Standard publications: Leveraging regularly scheduled newsletters, or email updates as a vehicle for relevant information helps legitimize their purpose, and gives an employee a reason to read.</li> </ul>
<b>REACHING HARD-TO-REACH EMPLOYEES (INCLUDING WITHOUT EMAIL ACCESS)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multi-channel publications: Companies leverage closed-circuit TV and digital signage in warehouses or plants to convey messages that others might receive via email.</li> <li>- Multi-language: Headquarters often work with the regional offices to ensure proper translation.</li> <li>- Liaisons: Knowledgeable individuals who can deliver messages.</li> </ul>
<b>BEING THE FIRST TO INFORM EMPLOYEES OF BREAKING NEWS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Streamlined approval process: Ability to quickly disseminate breaking news without obtaining multiple approvals.</li> <li>- Setting expectations: Conditioning employees to know that the company will endeavor to inform them of breaking news first.</li> </ul>
<b>BUILDING ENGAGEMENT WITH COMPANY/BRAND</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social media platforms/Intranets.</li> <li>- User-generated content.</li> </ul>

Several topics emerged as being key to internal communication. Participants were asked directly about some of these topics, and other points came up over the course of conversation. Much of these topics are addressed throughout the report; however, they're presented here, as well, for a more concentrated examination.

Topic Area	Observations
<b>STRATEGIC PLANNING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Policies and Procedures: Some companies place the idea of highly structured policies and procedures very high on their priority list.</li> <li>- Corporate strategies = Communications Strategies: Staying “on the same page” as the company at large is an effective approach for communications, keeping the company’s goals and objectives in mind at all turns.</li> </ul>
<b>DIGITIZATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intranet: Several companies utilize an Intranet system, and reviews are mixed. One participant noted the importance of striking a balance between using this to convey information the company wants to share and the information that team members need.</li> <li>- Digital signage: A valuable tool particularly for companies within which many employees are not necessarily at a desk or with a computer (especially delivery and manufacturing people), and some don’t go home and immediately go online. One participant noted that digital signage is used to convey a range of messages to this audience: including celebrating success, sharing important information, and communicating safety-related updates (particularly as it may relate to manufacturing).</li> <li>- Internal/satellite TV stations: Used to deliver content to certain audiences—again, particularly those not working at a computer.</li> <li>- Live Webcasts: It’s OK to be less “polished” in this age of “tell it like it is”—a straightforward and “as is” presentation of information is acceptable and actually embraced.</li> <li>- Social media: Addressed in several interviews, as reflected in comments included in comments on where improvements can occur.</li> </ul>
<b>REFLECTING BRAND PERSPECTIVE IN [INTERNAL/EMPLOYEE COMMS/EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Annual goals: One approach to maintaining engagement is making it part of the Internal Communication group’s annual goals. One participant said, “We contribute to the business’s success by making sure we increase the effectiveness and engagement of the [company] workforce in a way that’s measurable so we kind of put it right out there.”</li> </ul>
<b>BALANCING LOCAL REGIONAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNICATING IN DIVERSE LANGUAGES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Customization: Customizing for country and regional levels is considered a best practice.</li> <li>- Translation: When appropriate, content is translated for offices that speak a language other than the language in which the content was created (usually English). However it was noted that there is a point at which translating everything into multiple languages can become impractical.</li> <li>- Video broadcasting: Closed-captioning content is an option for addressing an audience that doesn’t all speak one language. Scripts are translated into all necessary languages before content airs.</li> <li>- Information age: One participant noted that information travels quickly, even on a global level. With that in mind, it’s key to be ready to communicate both internally and externally with ALL audiences with a sense of immediacy whenever there is an issue or crisis to be addressed.</li> <li>- Alignment: Global corporations must leverage communications so that all levels and regions are disseminating messages that are in concert with one another.</li> </ul>

**ATTRACTING, NURTURING AND  
RETAINING THE RIGHT TALENT FOR  
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

- Retention overview: Senior executives strongly believe that talent retention is vital to any company's success.
- Reasons to stay: There is recognition that over time, employees have become less likely to stay at one company for their entire career—there's more bouncing around within, and even across, industries. With that in mind, it becomes even more important for companies to make sure employees have a reason to stay.
- Description from one participant: "There's a big focus on recruitment and continual development and always looking ahead on the horizon."
- Engagement of employees: Critical, as employees who are engaged will want to stay. There is great value in keeping knowledge and expertise within the company where it was cultivated.
- Feeling valued: Employees appreciate it when they feel like their company is looking out for them in their professional growth. This can be a big factor in ensuring retention.
- Human resources: Recruitment and retention are often the responsibility of HR, but are still seen as priorities throughout the company.

**ESTABLISHING COMMON KNOWLEDGE,  
PURPOSE ACROSS COMPANY**

- Balance is key: As noted under DIGITIZATION, there is strength in striking the right balance between giving employees information the company wants to share and the information that team members need.
- Sensitivity: Timing and purpose of messages going out to employees should always be taken into consideration. For example, if layoffs were happening on a particular day, it would be most appropriate to hold off on an announcement of a high-level promotion (or other positive internal news) on the same day.

# Where Do We Go Tomorrow?

Dr. Richard Foster of the Yale School of Management reminds us that change is accelerating faster every day. In 1920, a corporation could expect a 67-year average lifespan on the S&P 500. By 1958, that average lifespan had dropped to 61 years. And by 1980, it was 25 years. Today, the average lifespan of a company on the S&P 500 is 18 years.

In 2000, a CEO could expect an average tenure of 10 years. Today, The Conference Board tells us that same CEO will be in their job an average of 8.4 years.

Moore's Law still rules the world of integrated circuits in computer technology. And the "mindsteps" elucidated by author Gerald Hawkins (*Mindsteps to the Cosmos*) remind us that the periods that separate major points of change are getting shorter all the time. The only thing certain in life is that change will remain the watchword, and a new generation of internal communicators will take the stage to guide their companies through the labyrinth.

In closing the first phase of research undertaken by the IPR's Commission on Organizational Communication, we want to spotlight those we identified as best-in-class communicators who participated in our interviews. We thank them deeply. Their insights and experiences have helped us craft a compelling narrative throughout.

As we move forward in the coming weeks, our Commission will work with KRC Research to test our key findings with employee communication leaders globally during the quantitative phase of our work to help us further develop key themes and to confirm practices and trends.

We invite your feedback and questions. And as you seek information and resources to help you in this area, we would encourage you to visit our Organizational Communication Resource Center <http://www.instituteforpr.org/orgcomm/>.





