



**The case for integrated, strategic communications:
Applying a strategic communications model for Eastern Health**

Position Paper
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May 1, 2006
Revised May 26, 2006

Following an intense developmental year, Eastern Health has now reached a critical point in its integration as it moves towards defining itself as a health care provider. While our vision, mission and goals have been identified, they now need to be brought to life through our actions.

How do we engage our employees in the process?
 What will motivate our leadership to help us achieve our goals?

DEFINING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Effective communications has been identified in numerous studies as a key to merger or integration success. The Oxford English Dictionary defines communication as “the act of imparting information.” It’s more difficult to find a definition for “effective communication.” Moreover, how can effective communications contribute to business success?

Communications must be strategic in order to achieve results.

In “Face-to-Face Communications: Creating an Engaged Workforce” Roger D’Aprix defines communications as “the process of converting ideas, data and information into knowledge and understanding.” He goes on to describe the challenge of using strategic communications to achieve business goals:

“Today, employees say they have so much information they don’t always know what to do with it. Communication, when it’s not strategic, seems random and chaotic. Strategic communication, on the other hand, brings focus and understanding, resulting in the change essential to today’s focus on quality.”

“Strategic” is one of those business words that gets used frequently in management circles but is often misunderstood. *Strategy* is derived from the Greek *stratēgos*, which referred to a military commander, and it was originally used to describe long-term and “global” military initiatives.

In the truest sense, strategic communications should take into account long-term goals and “the big picture” as opposed to focusing on tactics or immediate actions. The SPIN Project, a communication advocacy group, defines strategic communications as:

“...The art of presenting ideas clearly, concisely, persuasively and systematically in a timely manner to the right people. Strategic communications is about maximizing available resources and positioning your organization to be proactive instead of reactive. It’s about advancing your mission and actualizing your vision.”

For our purposes, then, **strategic communications** can be defined as:

The ongoing process of using “big picture” thinking to effectively share and implement organizational goals in such a way that:

- encourages personal accountability for the successful delivery of those goals; and
- creates or strengthens a perception of the organization that is conducive to attaining those goals.

DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

Eastern Health’s mission for the next two years is to successfully integrate health care services in our region. To achieve this mission it is critical that our leaders and frontline employees engage in the process and work collectively towards our identified goals.

In order to do this, we need to clear through the transitional clutter and focus on what we need from our leadership and frontline employees. In his ground-breaking book on transforming information into knowledge, Information Anxiety, Richard Saul Wurman describes the three businesses of change: change understanding; change commitment; and change navigation.

Applying Wurman’s thinking to Eastern Health, we have three main immediate and pressing organizational challenges:

- Building awareness and understanding of where we are going as an organization and how we plan to get there;
- Providing our employees with an opportunity to opt into the process; and
- Organizing information so that it gives our leaders and employees the power to get things done.

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

During the transitional phase, job insecurity, organizational change and shifting relationships all have a negative impact on employee engagement. Employee engagement affects everything from meeting financial targets to patient safety and quality care. And the responsibility for engagement rests with many internal partners, from Human Resources to Quality to Communications, from executive to frontline supervisors to union leadership.

According to the *Watson Wyatt Worldwide 2005/2006 Communication ROI Study*, communication effectiveness is a leading indicator of financial performance. Moreover, organizations that communicate effectively are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement and are 20% more likely to report lower turnover rates.

Employee commitment requires trust in leaders, active involvement in the change process and knowledge about where the organization is going and how this will impact on the roles we all play within an organization.

“Measuring Organizational Trust,” a recent study from the Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators, included a trust index which correlates trust factors with job satisfaction and operational effectiveness. The top five factors are:

1. Concern for employees
2. Openness and honesty
3. Common goals, values and beliefs
4. Consistent and dependable actions
5. Competence

Neither Eastern Health nor any of its foundational entities has effective baseline information to quantify trust in our organization. However, it is not difficult to predict that trust indicators for Eastern Health would be low. Our leaders are singularly focused on pulling together departments and programs and jockeying for organizational position; our foundational statements – those organizational goals, values and beliefs that were previously known, understood and accepted – have been changed; and how the organization will react is neither consistent nor dependable in this unstable time.

Of course, as much as new processes, new people, and new policies present challenges, they also present unique opportunities for an organization such as ours that is looking to define itself.

Adopting a strategic communications approach – an approach that focuses on the big picture and encourages personal accountability and a favourable environment for achieving goals – will support the organization’s plan for successful integration.

Strategic communications is less about telling the story of organizational change than it is about executing the change itself. By integrating strategic communications into our operational planning early we can effectively define how Eastern Health will interact with its stakeholders, handle crisis situations and plan into the future.

THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS MODEL



Effective 2-Way Communications

Dr. T.J. Larkin, a noted communications and change management expert and author of Communicating Change: Winning Employee Support for New Business Goals points to formal communications methods as an obstacle to merger success.

Formal methods of communicating information such as newsletters, web and email promote one-way communications. While these may be effective for certain types of information, they offer limited opportunities to build trust and promote involvement.

Strategic communication is two-way communication. Executive Team should promote and model two-way communications, seeking opportunities to engage the organization in two-way communications.

One-on-one discussions, group meetings and management by walking around are just some of the essential methods for overcoming employee resistance to change and for creating an engaged workforce that not only understands but lives the organization’s goals.

Strategic Communications Skills

When faced with a new set of goals or challenges, the question is – are we asking the right questions? Do we ask:

- “How will the change in this service impact upon other services we offer?”
- “What’s happening in the community that may cause a negative reaction to this initiative?”
- What will our corporate spokespeople have to say when questioned about this? And do they have all the information they need to understand the issue?

Too often we focus on tactics and not on strategy. Unfortunately, firing off a press release or printing up a brochure are only one element of and not a substitute for effectively communicating with key audiences.

Through organizational capacity/ staff development, Eastern Health needs to promote and encourage the development of strategic communications skills at all levels of the organization. “The Face-to-Face Communication Toolkit: Creating an Engaged Workforce” is an excellent program developed by the IABC that challenges managers and supervisors to examine their own communications skills and to learn how to use strategic communications to achieve operational goals and may be one possible program to support this goal.

Eastern Health is currently going through its first operational planning exercise, aligning program goals with organizational ones. Our program and department leaders must be encouraged to think about the strategic communications implications of their plans and to consider the need for communications plans to address those initiatives.

Effective Strategic Leadership

Eastern Health needs managers that understand global accountability. But, to what extent does Eastern Health promote and develop leaders who are effective strategic thinkers?

Executive Management has to rely on the members of the senior leadership team to encourage personal accountability within their programs and departments and to promote and encourage two-way communications.

The IABC's study of organization trust confirmed that the immediate supervisor was the most trusted source of information in an organization. This is not surprising; many studies confirm that employees look to their supervisors first as their preferred source of information.

Interestingly, in an informal communications survey conducted this fall for Eastern Health, 52% of respondents indicated that co-workers are their main source of information at work. There is clearly a disconnect in our organization and a threatening amount of rumor and speculation.

Effective External Branding

Eastern Health has introduced a new logo and begun to define the organization for the publics we serve. But, if branding is "the promise of an experience consistently delivered" than we clearly need to engage our employees in the process. After all, no matter how we position the organization, it is our employees who have to deliver on who and what we say we are every day.

The public perception of our organization impacts upon on our employees as well. Research has shown that the way that external stakeholders view an organization directly correlates with how employees feel about the work they do and about their employer. As Jim Clemmer says in *Team Spirit Built from the Top* "Most people want to be on a winning team, to feel proud of the organization and their own accomplishments."

However, as Clemmer and others point out, external advertising and branding that is inconsistent with how employees experience the organization "increases the 'snicker factor', deepens cynicism, and emotionally disconnects the staff delivering the services from the organization."

Eastern Health needs to brand its organization from the inside out, using values and organizational ideals as the premise. One way to do that is to develop a storytelling campaign that uses the experiences of our employees and those we serve to define who we are as an organization.

We also need to ensure that our logo (our corporate identity) is applied consistently and professionally throughout the organization.

And we need to seek opportunities to increase our profile through public speaking and presentations, publications – such as Our Health – and promotional opportunities through the media.

Research and Measurement

Eastern Health needs to make progress towards our goals as visible as possible, using the website, intranet, company newsletter, staff meetings and other displays. The more our employees know and understand not only our goals but how close or far we are from achieving them, the more likely it is that they feel ownership and partnership in the process.

Measuring staff engagement is not something our founding organizations have been able to do. We need to measure baseline levels of behaviour, knowledge and attitudes both internally and externally. With this information we will be able to better determine how effectively we are communicating and how strategic we are and can be as an organization.

Additionally, Corporate Communications needs to encourage measurement and evaluation in the communications planning process. We are all too often focused on getting the job done quickly and moving on to the next pressing project and we do not take the time to make sure that we are on-target in our communications strategies.

Corporate Communications Support

It is the role of the Corporate Communications Department to promote and support effective communications between Eastern Health and its stakeholders.

The Corporate Communications Department will develop a two-year communications plan for Eastern Health that supports our operational plan with a focus on strategic communications. We will also develop a branding program for the organization that focuses on (1) engaging employees in defining the brand through corporate storytelling; and (2) educating the public about the Eastern Health promise.

Corporate Communications personnel need to strengthen their role as strategic advisors, meeting with senior managers and their teams to assess the current understanding of our role in supporting their initiatives.

TAKING THE LEAD IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

In the highly acclaimed Corporate Conversations, Shel Holtz offers modern advice for strategic organizations on how to organize and manage the link between effective internal communications and business success. Just as the world of work has changed, with information and knowledge driving business in new ways, the way we communicate with our employees also must change.

“...The function of communicating to employees has evolved from the kind of reporting that populated most ‘house organs’ – the name given to fluff-filled company publications – to a strategic business activity, the kind that (in the words of a 2002 study by the Society of Human Resource Managers), ‘influences internal perceptions of organizational reputation and credibility’.”

The ultimate goal of strategic communications, then, is influence – influence over employee and public opinion about our organization and about the value and importance of our goals.