

Tooling up for the future: Creating a coalition between HR and communications

By Alison Boothby

At a recent Comma Partners networking event, Rohit Talwar – global futurist, award-winning speaker and CEO of Fast Future – gave an eyebrow-raising tour of the future of the business world. Without doubt, over the course of the next decade the world as we know it will change: the result of continued economic uncertainties, political instability, and the redistribution of wealth from west to east, the relentless advances in science and technology and intense global competition from emerging economies. In short, we're in for a turbulent time.

Rohit believes that "Organisations that can survive and thrive in what promises to be a decade of turbulence have to ensure they have a real understanding of the trends, forces and ideas shaping the future and are thinking through the long term implications of the decisions they make. Both HR and communications professionals are central to the process of building real organisation-wide understanding and ownership of the implications and facilitating collaborative approaches to defining and sharing the resulting strategies and actions the organisation will pursue to secure its future."

"We need to be creating environments that are much more comfortable with uncertainty and this requires trust," explains Alastair MacDonald, employee communications and engagement interim, "Sadly, all too often, trust between organisations and employees is fragile. We have a great opportunity to develop our role – perhaps a little less partial to the boardroom and its decisions - and form a coalition with our HR colleagues to increase engagement in our organisations." The changing nature of employee relations was a key theme from Rohit's presentation and the discussions that followed. Rohit highlighted that workforces have always been multigenerational, but the generational differences have been polarised through a combination of the effects of an ageing society with people staying in the workforce long after retirement and the decentralisation of communication driven largely by the explosion of social media.

Tomorrow's businesses and workforces require a very different approach from HR and communications, summarised in four key themes: Technology, Attitude, Innovation and Agility.

Technology

For organisations that are not up to speed with the impact of peer to peer communication or worse still – trying to prevent it – there's surely trouble ahead. In too many instances, our current cadre of leaders are blocking progress; not necessarily intentionally so, but by virtue of being out of touch with the pace of change, overly reliant on traditional command and control models and not enabling company culture to keep pace with technology. HR professionals have a real opportunity here to rise above the transactional processes they are too often accused of hiding behind, and to work strategically with the business to look at organisational design, performance management, reward systems and the learning and development necessary to equip their organisations for the future.

Attitude

It's about changing attitudes around communication in the workplace too, as Virginia Hicks, director of Comma Partners explains. "There is little desire for complex analysis by the majority and patience for lengthy business cases is wearing thin. With the expectation for immediate feedback and dialogue increasing, management teams need to be nimble and tuned in to what their people want. Leadership teams who agonise over perfecting operational messages behind



closed doors will miss the opportunity to be part of the real conversation that their workforce will be having anyway: conversations that will be happening without them.”

Of course, how leaders talk to and hear from their people has always been high on the HR agenda but the risks associated with not getting it right have magnified in the online world. Kim Borrowdale, a communications consultant working at a national legal practice, picks up this point: “I’ve put more focus on the tone of voice rather than the messages themselves as teams take more control of their own communications at a local level. I coach them to communicate in a much more conversational style where appropriate - a good exercise in helping them understand what they are saying to whom and why.”

It is this real time and informal approach to communications that employees are expecting in their organisations if they are to be engaged in the business. Being able to make change comfortable and unthreatening is a key concern for HR, “It’s essential for us to reference the business context and the changing customer needs in every communication so that employees realise that the organisation cannot stand still. The more we talk about the changing market, the future opportunities and challenges it presents and explain how and why the business is doing what it is doing, the better,” says strategic communications consultant, Philippa Anderson. “Linking everything back to the organisation’s vision so employees understand how their own goals and objectives fit into that vision becomes even more important with decentralised control over communication,” she adds.

Innovation

So what might businesses look like in the next ten years? Will the working patterns we currently accept as ‘normal’ in the UK still be recognisable? Alastair MacDonald again: “The light bulb didn’t come from the continuous improvement of the candle, so we’ve got to embrace new thinking, new ways of working and enable our organisational cultures to catch up with technology,” he told us. “In order to create organisations and businesses that will be truly sustainable on the global stage we have to get comfortable with challenging the status quo.” And Jenny Nabben, a senior interim manager working with large corporates, agrees wholeheartedly: “Leadership teams need to get comfortable with employees having the big ideas. This takes courage and humility – it’s a fundamental shift in the traditional workplace relationship. Our departmental structures already look a little tired, all too often stifling the flow of knowledge they were expected to promote, and almost always slowing down decision-making. We need to be working towards a genuinely cross-functional approach where flatter and less hierarchical structures focus on capability and knowledge sharing. We need to create environments that unlock the intelligence, creativity and innovation that exists within any employee base. This isn’t about skills: it’s about a shift in mind-set.”

Agility

At Unilever, they have introduced their Agile Working programme which values the performance and output of their people. Employees will have a greater say in how they work with high levels of trust rather than just sitting at a desk 9 to 5. Jacobina Plummer, global change and communications manager at Unilever explains: “In traditional ways of working, time and attendance were the key measurement of employees. For us, time and attendance are artificial barriers that can be removed. It’s about creating environments where employees want to work, where there’s a palpable energy to improve business performance and where individuals at all stages of their working lives feel valued.

“We’ve developed working practices around idea sharing and collaboration. By giving people more choice about how and when they work, we improve talent attraction and retention, increase our capability across the globe and improve productivity.



“Of course, this doesn’t happen overnight and we’ve put a real focus in the business on preparing our managers to manage for the future. Trusting their teams to deliver their work anytime anyplace is the starting point. Part of our role is to help teams create the visibility around how and when they will communicate with each other and to share their expectations around delivery and accountability.”

The challenge of engaging a multigenerational and ageing workforce in organisational structures that are more fragmented, fluid and virtual cannot be underestimated. HR processes must be centred on the demands of the individual and their changing needs throughout their employment lifecycle. Together, HR and their communications colleagues must instil a mindset in the organisation that is tolerant of change and uncertainty – this is the new ‘normal’. Building and sustaining employee trust and engagement is a high priority for successful and sustainable business in the next decade and whilst internal communications can oil the wheels, it’s HRs opportunity to shine.

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