CharityComms

HQ and beyond

Effective internal communication for charities with branches, regions or local groups

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HarknessKennett

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INTRODUCTION

Charities can be complicated creatures, spread across multiple locations, branches, regions and groups, all with their own cultures and ways of doing things.

Building systems and partnerships to encourage dialogue, engagement and consistent branding throughout such organisations can be tricky. For a start, busy staff and volunteers based in settings miles away from your central offices may need persuading that internal communication justifies their time and attention. And behind that obstacle may lie another fundamental challenge: ensuring that senior managers, in head office and beyond, recognise their responsibility for helping to encourage a culture of transparency and information-sharing in your charity.

Line managers – the preferred source of information for teams in any organisation – must be well-informed, skilled and willing communicators if they're going to help you disseminate key messages and encourage their staff to use the communications channels you provide. Yet many charity line managers will never visit head office, meet your senior management team or even communicate directly with the internal comms manager, if there is one. Rather they may be part of a local culture that feels remote from the centre and whose unique and indispensable contribution to the work of your charity is inadequately understood by other regions or by head office itself.

This Best Practice Guide focuses on 10 key challenges that emerged from a recent CharityComms seminar, round-table discussion and various follow-up conversations with internal comms professionals in complex charities. Some are common to all organisations, whether commercial or not-for profit, dispersed or single-location – but this guide is written for charity comms people who wish to develop effective communications throughout multiple localities and groups.

Vicky Browning, director, CharityComms

SPONSOR'S WELCOME

We're delighted to sponsor this CharityComms Best Practice Guide, addressing issues familiar to many of the organisations we work with. The challenges faced by communicators continue to change and gather pace – the rise of social media, 24-hour news, increasing emphasis on employee engagement and a state of almost constant organisational change.

Add into the mix the dispersed nature of many organisations and it's not surprising communicators are faced with conflicting feedback, "You don't tell us what's going on" versus "We get information overload."

This guide draws on a wealth of experience from those working inside and outside the not-for-profit sector. We believe it will be invaluable to communicators looking for insights and tips to engage their dispersed and diverse audiences.

James Harkness, founding partner, HarknessKennett

CHALLENGE 1 ►

I don't have time for internal comms

CHALLENGE 1

Hard-pressed charity staff and volunteers don't always see formal communications as a priority. Yet a well-executed internal communications (IC) strategy could be a vital factor in engaging and resourcing a workforce to give its best.

Human beings communicate to survive and prosper – through conversations, messages, meetings, stories, instructions and debates. The same goes for the inner workings of charities.

And many charities rely not only on the sharing of information and ideas between colleagues in a single location, but on deliberate systems to enable communication over multiple sites.

Overcoming reluctance

People often fear that saying yes to an IC request will be the thin end of the wedge, launching them into a daunting series of reporting commitments with little in it for them. A line manager you've never met in an office hundreds of miles from head office might resent having to implement your new weekly team briefing system; charity shop volunteers may avoid adding intranet reports (either reading or contributing them) to their workload.

The task is to demonstrate to colleagues – both in head office and beyond – that engaging with internal comms can help them to be more effective in their work, and will benefit the cause. Once you have won over senior management (see also Challenge 10, page 50), this will be much easier.

In response to the common complaints of "I don't see the point" or "I don't have time" – to read the chief executive's weekly bulletin, conduct team briefings, whatever it may be – there are key points to make.

Why bother?

1 Everyone has to communicate with their co-workers at some level. IC channels – whether intranet pages, newsletter offerings, emails, briefings or meetings – help you communicate more effectively and easily.

2 Being better informed about the work of your charity – and sharing information and ideas with others – allows you to progress more effectively in your work.

3 Keeping up to date with your organisation's vision, impacts and priorities makes you a great ambassador for the charity.

4 IC channels can allow you to make your voice heard and influence direction and culture.

5 The stories you share help you get recognition for the things you and your office, club, retail outlet or local group achieve.

6 Communications systems **save** you time, giving you ready-made media for your own news and a rich resource to draw on for many kinds of work.

7 You don't have to do it all! Find the channels that work best for you (see page 12).

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

> "Try to demonstrate the value of internal comms in terms that are relevant to colleagues. For example: it can help people to understand new procedures and therefore to work more efficiently; it equips people with key messages so that they can be effective ambassadors outside the organisation."

Ali Lyons, communications consultant

No news is bad news

Poor communication creates problems. You might need occasionally to remind reluctant (or even obstructive) line managers of this.

Staff and volunteers operating in far-flung locations and contexts cannot do their best to help your charity meet its goals if they are not kept abreast of the organisation's overall mission and strategic priorities, and of local, regional and central developments. Similar problems apply where people have few opportunities to raise concerns or influence policy or practice. An engagement with organisational issues affects not only an individual's approach to their work, but their sense of interest in and belonging to your charity.

The fall-outs from poor communication range from minor to major: a charity shop volunteer, unaware of key organisational values, gives the 'wrong' response to a customer's query (see also page 31); an unbriefed press officer struggles to handle a journalist's enquiry about the closure of a regional office. Where charities are working in conflict zones or dealing with health emergencies, the failure to disseminate a message, or the inability of an employee to make their voice heard at a critical time, can spell disaster.

A recent NHS report produced by the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) demonstrates the point. Based on eight case studies at high-performing NHS trusts, it shows how key IC disciplines such as communicating organisational values, facilitating employee voice and coaching senior managers towards better communication create a more engaged workforce. And it shows in turn that engaged employees help bring about better clinical outcomes.

NHS: ENGAGED STAFF MEANS SAFER PATIENTS

"We found that high-performing [NHS] trusts tend to have a strong set of organisational values, developed in partnership with employees. Trust values should be consistently communicated to employees and mainstreamed throughout the organisation, informing HR processes."

Executive summary

"Out of all of the indicators in the staff survey, the one that most predicts outcomes for staff in terms of wellbeing and absence, and for trusts in terms of their Care Quality Commission performance and mortality rates in the acute sector and patient satisfaction; it is engagement."

Professor Michael, West Lancaster University Management School

Extracts from *Meeting the Challenge: Successful Employee Engagement in the NHS* (IPOA, 2014). Read the full report at: ipa-involve.com/resources/publications/meeting-the-challenge/

GETTING OUT THERE

Internal communicators don't win hearts and minds by hiding at their desks, especially in charities where colleagues and activists are spread out over many locations and won't know you exist unless you tell them. As well as coming up with brilliant comms ideas and seeing them through, you need to be a prominent advocate for the function you represent. Three permanent items for the to-do list are:

1 Make (and keep) friends in key places

Forge strong one-to-one relationships with key players, including senior managers, in different locations and contexts – clubs, groups, field-workers, offices, shops or any other setting – all over the charity.

2 Be part of the induction process

To help ingrain internal comms as an integral part of organisational behaviour, make sure it has a space in your charity's induction programmes. Depending on the different sites where inductions may be carried out, you or a colleague might give an induction in person, or through disseminating materials for others to use. It's important to give each new staff member or volunteer an understanding about why and how they can use the communications channels on offer. Hopefully they will then embark on good habits from day one!

3 Ask the questions

Find out which forms of communication are most popular among staff and volunteers in different locations and fields of work – which channels are trusted, considered helpful, engaging or user-friendly and which are not. Do colleagues have new ideas you could try? Invite regular feedback from across the organisation and act upon it. Use surveys where appropriate (see page 11) but be careful not to risk survey fatigue or commission research you may not have the resources to see through.

An awful lot of research can be done without the use of formal surveys. Nurture key contacts and listen to what they have to say; invite comments and questions at induction events. Consider inviting local offices, shops, clubs or branches to send you informal feedback or to conduct their own investigations.

Strong communication creates strong charities

Honest, effective communication demonstrates that people count enough to be informed of developments – and also to be listened to, and to influence decisions where appropriate.

A substantial body of research now supports the view that better communication means a more highly-motivated and successful workforce. The correlation is noted by respected consultancies and individual research experts alike, in reports for government, public and private bodies.

Your aim is to arrive at a place where staff and volunteers all over your organisation are experiencing the benefits of robust internal communications for themselves. However, a healthy communications culture cannot develop without serious commitment from senior management. The importance of engaging managers with your strategy and initiatives will come up again and again in the course of this guide, and is at the heart of Challenge 10 (page 50).

CHALLENGE 2 ►

I don't know what's going on

or

You send me too much information

CHALLENGE 2

How often are you told you bombard colleagues with information while simultaneously hearing complaints that nobody really knows what's going on? This double-edged sword will be maddeningly familiar to many IC professionals. Both grievances come from the same place: someone's sense that head office has not taken the trouble to get to know who they are, where they fit into the picture, what kind of information they should have access to, and in what form.

You might be the first person in your charity to tackle a culture of non-disclosure, or a set of communications channels that have not been thought through. Perhaps you inherited a chaotic system in which every employee and volunteer – from home workers and youth group leaders to field work operatives and regional office directors – is deluged by every message, newsletter, briefing and booklet that can be thrown at them.

Or perhaps you have suffered the frustration of ensuring a key announcement goes out on multiple platforms, only to get a batch of complaints further down the road from people who claim they weren't told.

Understand your audiences

1 Learn to understand the different kinds of people and teams who make up your organisation. Spend time trying to stand in their shoes: what do they know already? What do they need to know? How do they feel about the information they receive and share? How willing are line managers in different locations and groups to engage with, brief and invite feedback from their teams?

2 Travel where necessary/possible or get in touch with key individuals by phone, Skype and email; ask about the kind of information they want and need.

3 Conduct an occasional internal comms audit; or get internal comms questions included in the annual employee engagement or other corporate surveys that might go out from head office. (See RSPB case study right).

4 As an alternative to a formal survey, invite different locations in your organisation to conduct their own communications audits, in any form.

5 Gather insights about corporate information coming out of your central and any major regional offices: what does senior management expect its staff and volunteers to know? How does this match up against the expectations of different groups around the organisation? Are there discrepancies that need to be tackled?

6 What are the communications/technology realities in your different localities and among the diverse workforces involved in your charity? How often do frontline field workers get access to a screen or face-to-face meetings?

RSPB: Learning from staff surveys

In large organisations like ours, staff surveys are a great way to gather feedback on how people are feeling and how this changes over time. We've run our annual staff engagement survey since 2009. By using the same questions at the same time each year, we've built up a clear picture of trends in engagement over time. Response rates increase each year as the survey becomes a familiar part of life here. The fact it's very short also helps!

We make great efforts to ensure our methodology is robust and that all staff receive survey results relevant to them. Having visible commitment from senior managers and taking action on the results are essential to its success. Publishing results is only the start; scores are used as a stimulus for discussions about working life and how improvements can be made.

Managers are encouraged to discuss departmental results with their teams to identify local actions, and we also run staff forums centrally to gather further suggestions for improvement.

In 2013, we introduced a similar survey for our volunteers. Results from both surveys feed into our annual assessment of organisational performance.

In 2014, we introduced a quarterly staff survey, which gives us a more frequent opportunity to gather views. Each 'Pulse' focuses on topical issues – for example, we've asked about pay and reward, internal communications, and our culture. Having the flexibility to change topics each time provides opportunities for timely input into organisational decisions.

Feedback through our surveys informs many organisational initiatives and it's vital that this is communicated back to our people so that they see the value in participating. When communicating about organisational projects and changes, we frequently make links to feedback gathered through our surveys to show our people that their views really are making a difference.

Victoria Carr, research analyst, RSPB

Which platform?

A huge range of communications channels now exists, with advances in technology greatly benefiting widely-spread charities. However it's not a case of the more channels you use the merrier.

As long as you're clear on your strategic goals for communications, know your audiences and have management support for a culture of transparency, effective internal communications can be ensured by sticking to a few trusty tools, including face-to-face meetings, email and the telephone. But it's also important to keep tabs on what's out there and foster a mindset of willingness to try new tools that could add real value.

CHOOSE YOUR TOOLS

- Line managers
- Senior managers
- Team meetings/briefings
- Internal enews
- External enews
- Print magazines/newsletters
- Text messaging
- Website
- Webcasts
- Intranet
- Audio/podcasts
- Desktop message alerts/desktop news feeds
- Staff/volunteer away days
- Attending regional meetings
- Road shows/other events
- Webinars
- Local advocates/champions
- Videos
- Surveys
- Social media – Facebook, Yammer etc
- Virtual meetings – Skype, Gotomeeting etc

The list above is not exhaustive and, of course, each has pros and cons depending on its contexts and users. Critically, most tools depend for their effectiveness on the communications competencies and attitudes of managers who will deliver, share or support them. You will need to find ways to offer your managers training, support or guidance – or convince them to get on board – as needed.

Melcrum internal communications consultancy offers a helpful reference table for checking the pros and cons of different platforms for different purposes at melcrum.com/choosing-right-communication-channel-version-20

Channelling your comms

Keep in mind the following:

1 **Select** the most relevant channels for the various groups that make up your workforce.

2 **Be realistic** – which options do you have the budget and resources to manage?

3 Having created your channels, **encourage staff** in different situations to choose what works for them.

4 **Audit** your mailing lists. Ensure people are not on multiple mailing lists without good reason.

5 **Stay on top** of what is being sent out from head office and other key centres. Watch out for gaps or information overload.

6 **Segment** your lists. Use organisational knowledge and the information you have gleaned from surveys and other feedback to target more staff and volunteers with the correct media and fewer with media they don't want or need.

7 **Be deliberate** in all your own communications and in those you encourage others to share. What do you expect your audience to do – or think, or feel – as a result of this communication?

8 Include prominent **opt-in and opt-out** choices on all appropriate channels.

9 On the other hand, be aware of what constitutes vital '**need to know**' information – which should not have an opt-out button! Find ways to encourage engagement with it.

10 **Keep managers up-to-date** with your findings and plans, and use them as a key resource for: disseminating information to their teams, keeping tabs on what staff and volunteers under their supervision are absorbing or not absorbing and filling you in on their findings.

The Scout Association: Communicating our strategic plan

The Scout Association has a vision for where it wants to be and what it wants to achieve by 2018. In May 2014 the strategic plan of how we would get there was launched, setting out the focus for our work and the targets that need to be achieved by our staff, our 100,000 volunteer members, and our 400,000 young people.

Talking about strategies, corporate visions and targets can be a real turn off for volunteers who get involved in Scouting in their spare time after work to have fun and invest in the young people of today, not to read strategy documents. Our challenge was to explain the plan to all members, ensure they are clear about the goals and motivate them. We took the following key steps:

- We had strong face-to-face engagement with our volunteer managers before launch to ensure they had fed into the plan, understood the challenge ahead and the role they needed to play in motivating other volunteers locally.
- Additional support and briefing for volunteer managers was provided just before launch day to provide them with details on the communications plan (ensuring they knew who would be told what when) and materials (PowerPoint presentations, briefing documents etc) they could use at their own meetings.
- We built anticipation: social media was used in the three days leading up to launch to get members excited about a new announcement coming up. A quirky time slot was set on launch day to ensure we could tell members exactly when to be online and create a bit of fun in a short amount of time. We promised to launch our plans for 2014-2018 between 20:14 and 20:18.

- Social media posting was the first activity to happen on launch day. We promoted one new strand of our plan every minute between 8.14pm and 8.18pm and asked people to give comments, feed back and share. We used the hashtag #scouting4all to gain volume and direct people to the microsite built for the plan for more details.
- Concurrently an all-member email was sent to ensure those not on social media were not left out.
- We set up a resources page on our website, with an FAQ document, a more detailed plan document for those interested in the strategic detail, background on all the research undertaken to create the plan and resources to use locally to share it.

The plan now involves a year of repeating the message and sharing case studies of people completing their targets. These are published in our magazine, in email newsletters and on the website. There will also be a shareable video that explains the plan and an individual pocket reminder booklet of what everyone's role is in achieving the plan, going out with our members' magazine.

Hermione Clulow, internal communications manager, The Scout Association

What do you want from me?

CHALLENGE 3 ►

CHALLENGE 3

Central communications teams often struggle to get hold of the information or local spokespeople they need to ensure proper reporting about what's going on in different parts of the wider organisation.

Most find that certain individuals, groups or regions are much more prolific or confident reporters than others, which can cause problems of its own.

UNEVEN SPREAD

"One region is forever sending us more information than we want or need. Meanwhile there are regions who don't realise that the issues and successes they experience are stories we desperately want to hear."

Charity communicator

Find local reporters

Recruiting and nurturing regular story-gatherers will be key to tackling this challenge. The more dispersed your organisation, the bigger a priority it will be for you to make allies in different locations.

Perhaps you have regional counterparts with a communications remit as part of their job description, who expect to gather stories among groups in their area. If not, it is even more important to develop a good rapport with a regional director or local group leader – ask them to request stories from colleagues in the area, or at least send out a few extra prods on your behalf.

Talented communicators can often be found among volunteer groups if you look – for example you could post 'adverts' for them on your intranet, social media network or similar. A communications-minded volunteer will enjoy meeting the challenge of finding and posting stories from their area.

Make sure your reporters are clear about the information you need from them and why you need it. Offer media training opportunities and regular reporting incentives: publicise success stories and the teams behind them, get people to vote on story, fundraiser or project of the month (or whatever works for you) so efforts are recognised and celebrated.

In many charities, local and regional groups may be responsible for their own media. They may have substantial or total autonomy and are not managed, directed or instructed by the centre – something that brings its own benefits and challenges for central communications teams. However, by offering support and encouragement, you can still help ensure the quality and consistency of independent local reporting.

INFORMATION REQUESTS: CLARITY CHECKLIST

1 What exactly are you asking for? For example:

- case studies
- photographs
- news reports
- success stories
- departmental information
- survey responses
- opinions/feedback
- ideas

2 Who are you asking? Have you approached a named contact or is the request being made through a general mailing? Do you need to hear from the team leader, a specialist worker/volunteer – or can anyone respond?

3 Indicate where the material will be used, if it is used, for example

- one-off report
- annual review
- staff magazine or staff handbook
- intranet post
- team briefing
- social media (eg Facebook)
- consultation
- online bank or database of stories

4 Offer training sessions to help your contributors develop their writing, presentation, media interview or photography skills.

5 Provide local offices, clubs, shops or groups with a communications toolkit containing good examples of/tips for magazine articles, intranet stories, press releases and so on.

6 Set up a system for dealing with submissions. You can't guarantee every submission will end up being used for its intended purpose, but you can treat each one with respect and try to ensure stories are not wasted. Encourage senders to forward any material you cannot use to their local press where applicable, or to local intranet/web/Facebook pages you might have in place.

7 Keep a running log of the sources and types of stories and news you are using, so you can clearly identify any regions, projects or types of work that need more coverage.

Relate: Media training for independent local charities

Relate is a federated organisation with 60 local centres around the country, supported by a national charity. Relate centres do their own media work in their local areas, which the media team in the national charity supports and promotes.

One of our key focuses is providing media training for spokespeople from centres, which is something we provide regionally.

It's important that people are trained as media spokespeople for a number of reasons. It presents a unified, consistent and expert face to the world, but it also means staff from local centres feel able and empowered to promote their own work.

As each Relate centre is an independent charity, we do not mandate that anyone attends training. However, we reiterate at every opportunity that a consistent and professional approach to media activity – both traditional and new – is crucial to growing and protecting the Relate brand. Only by aligning our messaging and activities will we be able to realise our true brand power.

We try to encourage centres to attend by ensuring the training is as easy for them to get to as possible. We aim to hold at least four training days per year – one in each region of the country. The training is free to centres and is open to anyone who may act as a spokesperson. As a minimum, we want to train the manager and one practitioner from each centre.

Once the training has been done, we look for opportunities for these spokespeople to help build confidence in their skills. Local and regional media requests often come to the national media office first and we will always aim to place these opportunities with someone who has been trained in the relevant geographical area.

We also have a daily news round-up which goes out to all centres. This includes coverage from local Relate centres and we always ensure that interviews with media-trained spokespeople get a mention so others are encouraged to take up the training. Alongside the training we provide template news releases linking to seasonal hooks and integrated campaigns, radio discussion ideas, bespoke briefings for big or tricky issues, and we manage sensitive issues that could impact the Relate brand.

Jessica Faulkner, senior media and communications officer, Relate

Mind: Supporting local, independent, groups

Mind is a national charity with a network of 150 federated local charities. These local Minds are entirely independent organisations: they have their own management, trustees and staff, and are responsible for their own governance and funding. The network is incredibly varied, ranging from small, volunteer-led organisations to those with multi-million pound turnovers.

This arrangement offers huge benefits. Each local Mind can develop and deliver services that meet the needs of its local community, and at a national level we benefit from the breadth of insight and experience this brings. It gives us a flexibility and diversity that a branch structure could not match.

However, it does bring communications challenges. The Mind brand is shared across the network, and we know that most audiences do not see national and local Minds as separate. We need to ensure that we are all representing our shared values, but we do not have 'control' over local Mind communications. Our aim in the national team is therefore to support local Minds to deliver excellent communications themselves, and to make it as easy as possible for them to be on brand.

As well as providing local Minds with access to all our brand photography and illustrations, we have developed a library of more than 400 template materials they can use, covering a range of formats and designs. There is also a WordPress template for their websites.

We offer one-to-one advice on communications, particularly on using digital and social media. We also provide media support, particularly during crisis situations, and offer regional training on media, communications and marketing. This year we will be developing a range of 'how-to' guides to deal with the most common enquiries we get.

We promote the offer regularly through various channels, such as the regular network e-newsletter and regional and national meetings of local Minds. Feedback from local Minds is positive, with people saying that the materials are "great" and "really helpful". In the past year 788 people from the network have used our online resource centre.

Ruth Richards, head of communications, Mind

Soroptimist International: Promote sharing by celebrating good examples

Soroptimist International is a global women's volunteer organisation that works to educate, empower and enable opportunities for women and girls. Over 80,000 women worldwide are members of local clubs, working to improve the lives of women and girls in their communities and beyond.

With so much local activity going on around the world, finding out what clubs are doing is vital; for promotion, sharing good practice and monitoring/reporting our impact. SI clubs are all required to submit reports of their club activities via an online system, including photographs, but for many clubs, this isn't seen as a priority. They are busy volunteers, working on local or regional projects, so it's not surprising that logging onto a website and filling in a form isn't top of their to-do list!

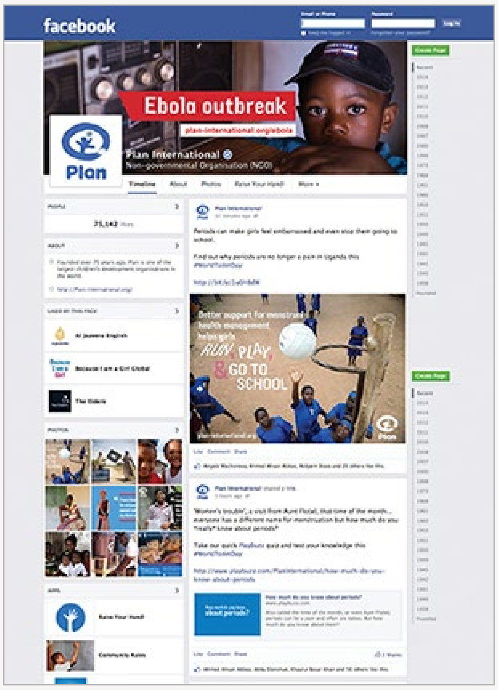
To remind and encourage Soroptimists to fill in online reports about their activities, I introduced a 'monthly round-up' of good projects reported, particularly those with photos. We upload pictures and project descriptions to the SI website, Facebook and Flickr and share this in our monthly email newsletter. This not only helps to give a really good insight into the range and type of Soroptimist work going on around the world, but also gives clubs a good reason to report their projects and include pictures – we all like having our good work celebrated and recognised.

At Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland, one of four Soroptimist federations which together represent clubs in 130 countries, communications officer Lisa Roscoe has just introduced a 'photo of the month' competition with the same aim. Like our global monthly round-ups, this celebrates club work and encourages members to share photographs.

Key lessons:
Sharing information may be a priority for you at HQ, but it won't be for volunteers and staff on the ground. Giving them a reason to want to share information can really help.

Rosi Jack, communications manager, Soroptimist International, 2012-2014

Plan International: How we found our Facebook feet



How do you get 50 programme countries, four regional offices, one global HQ and 20-odd fundraising offices on the same Facebook page, if not literally, then at least figuratively? That's the question we've been asking ourselves at Plan International, a global children's development organisation, for the past three years – and we now think we have something vaguely resembling the answer.

We started out like any enthusiastic yet apprehensive charity does. We had a global Facebook page and a handful of other pages that our more adventurous offices, primarily those raising money, had started by themselves. But the content we were creating and communicating was sporadic, haphazard and uncoordinated.

No one Plan entity was really in tune with another, but the higher-ups and decision-makers were coming round to the idea that social media could potentially add a great deal of value to what we were doing. Country directors started asking questions about how they could use social media in their countries. At first, we weren't really sure.

We took stock of what we had, set up regional social media profiles and began encouraging our country offices to get involved.

Facebook seemed the best platform for us. Our comms staff at the country level almost universally 'get' Facebook – and not only that, but they enjoy using it. All they really needed was a little support and pointing in the right direction.

This pointing came in the form of training, ideas for how to source content, strategies and help setting up things like editorial calendars based around themes. We made sure to always be there to offer support when needed. This was enough to get many of our countries interested and taking pride in building up their Facebook pages. Soon they started making social media part of someone's job description.

Developing a definitive, organisation-wide communications strategy and a set of social media guidelines helped keep everything together and ensured we were all speaking with the same voice. Once we could visualise and categorically say what we were aiming for as an organisation, the rest seemed to fall into place. This leadership from our HQ helped everyone to figure out why the heck we were investing so much time into playing on Facebook.

Matt Crook, communications consultant, Plan International

Read this article in full at charitycomms.org.uk/articles/it-started-with-a-page-how-we-found-our-facebook-feet

CHALLENGE 4 ►

Stop ignoring your volunteers!

CHALLENGE 4

Many charities were founded and built up by volunteers, who formed groups and gathered supporters, momentum and identities all their own before joining up with others to create larger organisations.

Yet lack of access and exposure to volunteers can leave head office staff disconnected from the vital services volunteers carry out all over the country.

Volunteers remain a major and indispensable workforce for charities; in many, they constitute 90 per cent or more of personnel. In other words, volunteers are precious – and this should be reflected in your communications.

THREE STEPS TO VOLUNTEER-FRIENDLY COMMS

1 Keep volunteers in the loop

Volunteers might only work for your charity once or twice a week and may have little formal connection with head office. You need to nurture a feeling of belonging and connectedness among often widely-dispersed teams or individuals – and facilitate getting information back and forth.

Check which of your comms channels are already reaching which volunteers and where access needs to be extended to more people. What kinds of messages are volunteers missing? Should you tailor some messages to suit a volunteer audience? Conversely, could any of your channels be streamlined to embrace staff and volunteers alike? Could you use volunteer leaders to disseminate relevant information to harder-to-reach colleagues?

Where volunteers run local branches, groups, clubs, shops or other entities, head office should probably be communicating with them as regularly, and in many of the same ways, as it communicates with staff-run local offices.

2 Respect autonomy

Volunteer groups and individuals are under no obligation to take instructions from head office, or the comms department. So the onus is on the communicator to find ways of encouraging participation and engagement.

Training opportunities can offer an incentive, as volunteers may be keen to sharpen their skills. Visibility, in the form of a photo or byline (see below), will also enhance motivation. But the key incentive is being taken seriously, listened to and acknowledged by staff in the organisation. In other words, being embraced as a part of the team.

3 Celebrate volunteer contributions

Include stories of and by volunteers in your regular internal media. You can personally ensure they appear in central communications that go out. It's also a good idea to create platforms on which volunteers will want to share their own stories, comments and ideas, by including dedicated pages on the intranet, Facebook etc.

On top of this, some charities formally recognise volunteer contributions every year through commendations, awards and benefits – which should be communicated to volunteers and staff alike, all over the organisation.

Recognising volunteers at RSPB

We recognise six of our outstanding volunteers – those who have gone that extra mile and really made a difference in a big way – with our annual President's Award. These are, in effect, our volunteering Oscars and they are given out at our AGM in London. We try to ensure individuals are unaware they have been nominated for an award by their colleagues. That way it comes as a nice surprise when they get a letter from our chief executive telling them they've won.

By presenting these awards at our AGM we ensure our whole senior management team gets to hear six great stories about how volunteers are contributing their time and talents to the RSPB.

These awards are just one part of how we recognise and reward our volunteers at the RSPB; another is ensuring where possible our volunteers have access to some of the 'benefits' our staff enjoy. Many organisations offer benefits or discounts to their paid staff but shy away from offering the same thing to their unpaid staff – their volunteers. Usually this is because they are either afraid of creating a contract of employment with their volunteers or just don't know how to adapt and communicate the offer to their volunteers.

In order to give our volunteers access to the same discounts as our staff we developed an RSPB volunteer card that we give to all our volunteers who have done 50 hours or more volunteering for us in the last financial year. The card entitles the holder to all the same discounts our staff enjoy. It is issued retrospectively and not offered as an incentive to volunteer, therefore avoiding being seen as possibly creating a contract of employment with our volunteers.

The card is posted to all qualifying volunteers in April/May each year and valid though to July the following year. Every volunteer receives a personal letter with their card, which allows us to include some key organisational messages at the same time.

Our volunteers are highly motivated. They tell us they feel thanked, appreciated and part of one team working to save nature.

Alan Murray, head of volunteering development, RSPB

The Scout Association: Key lessons learned for mass volunteer communications

Timing. Our volunteer members are busy running Scouting, but also have their own working and domestic lives to attend to. The timing of new initiatives launched from HQ may not fit with their plans, which can cause extra stress locally. Allowing plenty of time for announcements and ensuring our members do not hear about new things via the media is vital.

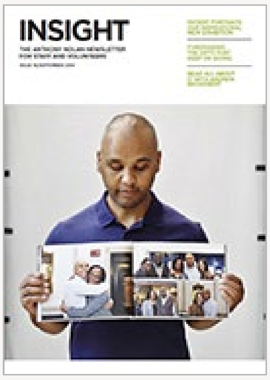
Channels. With a wide range of members, of different ages, locations and lifestyles, we cannot rely on one method of communications to reach everyone. We always use a mix, so it's important for us to schedule messages and devise content that will work across emails, magazine, website and social media, as well as a way it can be presented face-to-face by a line manager. Preparing all this to be ready at the same time is a challenge but important for consistent messaging to all members at once.

Language. A lot of communications from HQ can be hard for non-HQ people to understand if it is left in a formal, business-led format. We take copy from specialist colleagues and turn it into something more accessible for non-specialist readers. We ensure our updates for members are not too long, use positive words of encouragement, and split things out into news and actions that can be seen at a glance.

Tailoring. Not everyone needs to know everything. Communications from HQ are reviewed before being sent out via the different channels to check their relevance for different roles in different locations. Tailoring comms makes it more personal and more engaging. We ensure copy is adjusted to find the aspect that's most relevant to the reader concerned, rather than always using the same text for all.

Hermione Clulow, internal communications manager, The Scout Association

Anthony Nolan: One magazine for volunteers and staff



At Anthony Nolan we have thousands of volunteers engaged in a wide variety of activities across the organisation. They raise money, increase awareness, inspire people to join our stem cell donor register, support our remarkable donors and deliver life-saving stem cells to patients in urgent need of a transplant.

As volunteer engagement manager, it's my job to understand what motivates and inspires our volunteers, the reasons they have for supporting Anthony Nolan, what they want to know about the organisation and how they would like to receive communications from us.

My role is a new addition for the organisation. Its very existence grew out of an organisational desire for a more strategic approach to volunteer engagement. When I joined the organisation, one of my first tasks was to map our communications channels to gain a picture of the many ways we engage our volunteers. From this work it was clear to us that, as a first priority, we should streamline and consolidate some of our various newsletters produced for an internal audience (at the time there was a different newsletter for each different category of volunteer).

We decided to refresh and enhance INSIGHT, our existing staff newsletter, to appeal to volunteers across Anthony Nolan. The first edition of the revamped magazine was launched during Volunteers Week (June 2014) and, along with the usual great content, was packed full of inspiring stories for, and about, our volunteers. It has become a one-stop shop for staff and volunteers to receive and share information.

The magazine is produced quarterly and will continue to be written with volunteers, as well as staff, in mind. Every edition will include content relevant to volunteers and a dedicated space for each volunteering activity, where they can share news, stories and achievements. It's all part of our on-going commitment to valuing volunteers as a vital part of the organisation and recognising their contribution to our continued success.

The introduction of a joint staff and volunteer newsletter is the first step in a wider and on-going piece of work around how we engage with volunteers. We will gain feedback on INSIGHT to make sure we are always improving and will continue to ask our volunteers what they would like to know and how they would like to hear about it.

We hope to use engaging articles to bring about a sense of a wider Anthony Nolan community, where we are all working together to make a real difference. The magazine will also be used as a means to celebrate the activities and achievements of volunteers and ensure they feel involved in, and know how to influence, the work of the organisation. Like many charities, Anthony Nolan was first set up by volunteers, so in a sense we aren't doing anything new, just reconnecting with where it all began, and harnessing the extraordinary energy and passion that volunteers bring to achieve our core activity of saving the lives of people with blood cancer.

Liz Wigelsworth, volunteer engagement manager, Anthony Nolan

HQ doesn't understand or engage with local issues

CHALLENGE 5 ►

CHALLENGE 5

Lack of engagement with local issues is a serious charge and a common one in dispersed charities. Despite good intentions, it can be hard for head office staff to break out of their own centralised bubble.

Often these staff come to the charity from roles in other organisations and never gain direct experience 'in the field'. Yet central offices are usually tasked with coordinating and setting the charity's brand and mission.

Unless your centre makes sustained and deliberate efforts to integrate with the different parts of your organisation, it will find itself attempting to impose an identity of its own making on the grassroots of the charity.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LOCALITIES

1 Recognise who they are and what they do

Head office must be consciously aware that the many locations that make up the charity are the charity – something its communications should reflect. Local branches, offices, shops, clubs, groups or regions may have developed very strong identities of their own, particular to their own culture, activities and supporter base. They know their members, supporters, clients or customers much better than you do and are the driving force behind the success of the charity in their area; head office needs to recognise and champion their efforts to do what they do best.

2 Engagement checklist

Put in place a standard communications planning process, so that every time senior management wants to communicate or seek feedback on something, they go through a checklist of the different local audiences.

3 People to people

Find ways to help key head office people stay in touch with people in different locations – for example, through webinars, meetings with activists (in person or remote), and proactive efforts to gather sample opinions on new campaigns or initiatives.

4 Nurture key contacts

Spend time nurturing your own communications channels with key staff and volunteers all over the organisation.

5 Back to our roots

Keep your grassroots in plain sight, whatever changes come. Most charities have developed from the ground up – it makes sense to be attentive to your foundations. This might mean, for example, including in your communications mix stories and messages about 'how we got here' or how a regional or local initiative has influenced your charity's history or development or solved an organisational problem.

6 Respect

Be respectful of local or regional identities and values in your dealings with different offices or groups. Remember, the success of your charity in its different regions will be rooted in local issues and relationships – the local campaign and people are what matters to a local MP or radio station, not your national policy document or your CEO.

Communications should avoid reflecting a central perspective where this is not necessary or appropriate. As a prominent communicator in your charity, you can act as a role model, influencing head office culture through your own respectful, consensus-seeking communications. You can also offer training or guidelines to help head office personnel recognise the impacts of different communication styles.

7 Promote stories from the regions

Using approaches discussed in the previous pages, find ways to get hold of success stories from your different locations and celebrate them: report and publicise them through appropriate internal and external channels; facilitate feedback on them through internal social media, promote them as 'story of the month' or 'most liked story', as appropriate.

8 Proactive encouragement

Think up schemes and incentives to generate more information, insights, views and stories from around the organisation. They could involve, for example:

- **'Put your local issues to the chief exec/senior management team'**. This can happen through in-person events, Skype or teleconferencing meetings, ideas boxes, webinars, email invitations – or any number of other ways. Make sure there's an outcome: a response, action, circular of issues or whatever is appropriate.
- **Tailored intranet space** in which local groups, offices, shops or other outlets are encouraged to post comments relating to local issues, developments or concerns.
- Use relevant media to feature **regular profiles** of different local teams or groups explaining their roles, contexts, challenges and so on.

9 Local surveys

Schedule **specific research** designed to find out what the issues and challenges are for staff and volunteers in different localities and contexts, and what they think about head office engagement with their area. Make sure any findings are available to staff or volunteers who are visiting the area concerned.

10 Working relationships

Encourage head office and different locations to **work jointly** to develop local area strategies, identifying and acting upon local issues and challenges. Find ways to encourage management to be transparent and communicative about the influence regions and localities have on organisational decisions; and what corporate priorities have been in particular places. This kind of work depends upon your own relationships with HR and senior management (see Challenge 10, page 50).

National Autistic Society: Local groups at the heart of campaigning

The National Autistic Society's *Push for Action* campaign (autism.org.uk/push) aimed to drive national and local change by putting community groups at the heart of the engagement strategy. These included NAS branches (parent-led affiliated groups run by volunteers) and NAS services such as adult social groups, as well as other local and regional autism charities. As is always the case, these groups are incredibly diverse and each presents different strengths and challenges, but we were clear they had to be properly integrated in the campaign if it was to be successful.

It was a steep learning curve, but lots of what we tried worked. Here are four things we learned from the campaign:

1 Localise whatever you can

The *Push for Action* web presence could only be accessed as a local page, branded as that community's local campaign, with information on the local authority's performance, the number of people who have signed up in the area, local groups and charities who are partners in the campaign, local news stories and supporter comments. This, among other things, helped groups take ownership of the campaign in their own area.

2 Promote and celebrate

Celebrating and championing local activity on prominent platforms not only helps your groups feel valued, but also reinforces the sense that what's happening locally *is* the campaign, not just an add-on. For *Push for Action*, we prominently positioned local charities and groups on the relevant local campaign pages, heavily promoted their activities and achievements on social media, and offered blog posts and speaking opportunities to those involved. In return, those groups were proactive in promoting the campaign to their own audiences.

3 Demonstrate a clear journey

From the start, local groups knew the campaign road-map and more-or-less what would be asked of them over the 12 to 15 months the campaign would run for. This clarity of role helps to get buy-in, but also helps those groups to understand how the work they do is integral to the broader campaign.

4 Be 'real people'

Whenever you can, get out there and actually meet the groups you are trying to get on board. Building real, face-to-face relationships is by far the most effective way to stop your HQ coming across like a faceless dictator and more like a bunch of real people who share your values and aspirations – in other words, people you want to work with.

Tom Madders, head of policy and campaigns, National Autistic Society

Understanding the local charity shop floor

Many of the charities I work with have a chain of shops, selling donated and new goods to raise funds and brand awareness. They are often the main high street presence for these organisations and, as such, communicating well with the staff and volunteers who run them is absolutely vital. It's also a considerable challenge to get right.

There are a number of reasons for this. The fact that shops don't have the same access to email, intranet and other online communications channels is often seen as the main problem – this line of thinking reasons that if shops could just be given networked PCs, then everything would be OK. But I'm not so sure. I think there are bigger communications questions to consider.

Local shop managers I speak to tell me that the operational communications they receive are fairly effective – these tell them how to set up their window displays, what monthly promotions to offer or how their bottom line is looking. But what they really want is to feel more connected to the rest of the charity, to have a better understanding of the organisational aims and objectives and how they fit in. They want this information for themselves, for their volunteers and for their customers. When someone comes in off the street and asks what the charity spends its money on or how to access a service, they want to be able to answer well and not be left red-faced.

To address the challenges of shop communications, I think communicators and leaders need a real understanding of day-to-day shop life. With volunteers working different shifts, limited square footage and constant interruptions to any back-room task, shop environments are very different to head office. Core communications principles have to be applied, but execution must fit the environment.

Sarah Browning, freelance communication specialist, Browning York

CHALLENGE 6 ►

It's them v us

CHALLENGE 6

Much of this issue fits with the previous challenge. That is to say, problems arise when people feel head office doesn't understand where its localities are coming from.

However, it is important to tackle the specific problem that head office may be seen as an ivory tower – inaccessible to the component parts of the organisation it is supposed to serve.

Head office and central management are often seen as one and the same thing by outlying regions of a charity. Even if they know this is not the case, non-head office people may perceive that central staff present themselves as, collectively, more important than staff/volunteers in other places. As a result, the gulf can only widen, with local offices giving head office as wide a berth as they see head office giving its local offices.

So a key task for communicators in dispersed organisations is to drive systems that expressly create access to, and humanise, head office. Once again, you will need influence with senior management to ensure some of these things happen.

INTRODUCING SMT

“At World Society for the Protection of Animals (now World Animal Protection), which has offices around the world, I introduced video updates from the senior management team. The first one was about the new organisational strategy. It had rather too many talking heads but nonetheless was appreciated.”

Ali Lyons, communications consultant

Six approaches to humanising head office

1 Q&A sessions. Arrange question and answer encounters between management and local groups, involving Skype, the intranet or regular visits to different regions.

2 Social media – eg through private Facebook pages, SharePoint, Yammer etc. Encourage management to join staff or volunteers anywhere in the organisation to post comments; encourage management to respond to applicable comments posted by others.

3 Special initiatives. Use communications channels to invite ideas regularly – eg 'If you were CEO, what would you do?' Arrange regular opportunities for individual volunteers or staff members in the different parts of the organisation to 'Come and shadow our CEO for a day'. They could be invited to sit in on board meetings, get an insight into current debates and express opinions to the chief executive in person.

4 Share and learn. Through your various communications channels, help different teams – in head office and different localities alike – to understand what others do and the things they have in common.

5 Personal contact. Where budgets and time pressures allow, persuade head office staff to attend local meetings; similarly, invite local staff to attend meetings at head office. In both instances, expenses are minimised by encouraging staff to add meetings to their itineraries when they are travelling anyway in the course of their work. If there is no travel budget, try to foster a culture in which central and local teams will invite remote participation at their meetings when this may be pertinent, via Skype, teleconferencing or whatever means.

6 Be respectful in your own communications with local groups and encourage a respectful communications culture throughout head office, offering guidelines or training where appropriate. This includes showing appreciation for all stories, case studies and so on received (see also page 17).

Alzheimer's Society: Getting leadership on the road

We still sometimes hear our volunteers and employees say "the bosses don't really understand our day to day pressures" or "we don't know enough about what's going on across the Society". This is despite a variety of popular communications channels for people to tap into, including a monthly phone-in to hear the chief executive elaborate on the big topics of the moment. We know from all our surveys that face-to-face communication is most effective, and most trusted, so, to facilitate more dialogue between the decision-makers and the people, we began what became known as the annual 'leadership tour'.

It began three years ago to launch our new strategy and to hear people's views about implementing it; another aim was to increase the accessibility of 'leadership', building trust as we embarked on an ambitious five-year journey. At each meeting was the chief executive or his deputy, one of the executive team, one of our trustees, and the relevant regional director, all with one voice. Participants are non-managers – people who don't often get the chance to go to a networking meeting or share their ideas with a range of colleagues and directors, but who are the lifeblood of the organisation.

It's tempting to throw into the mix everything your volunteers and employees should know about, but we keep the initial presentation short, with a personal focus from the presenter, and the rest of the day is shaped around table discussions, with leaders sharing the tables, not pulled out as a panel at the front. There are fun bits in the day too, to help keep the atmosphere informal, and numbers have until now been limited to a maximum of 30 attendees to ensure it's a relatively intimate group. This year we're taking the brave step of upping the sessions to 50 participants to reach more people … let's hope we can maintain the wonderful, 'learning' dialogue the tour is famous for.

Catherine Easey, head of internal communications, Alzheimer's Society

Tell us what's changing

CHALLENGE 7 ►

CHALLENGE 7

When a new decision affects the work of your staff or volunteers and, especially, when a change is likely to impact their jobs, it's critically important that the change is communicated well. The priorities will be to ensure awareness, understanding, acceptance or engagement with the change.

In a widely-dispersed and diverse organisation, it is crucial to be sensitive and well-organised in your planning, so all groups are included in announcements when and as appropriate, and have their particular needs addressed.

Generally, you will need to work closely with senior management and HR in order to roll out a decent change communication programme.

Change can mean a whole spectrum of different things. For example:
- Changes to branding, values or other strategic direction
- Decisions that change working conditions or working methods for some or all staff or volunteers
- Redundancies or relocations affecting specific parts of the organisation
- A new recycling policy

While there can be no perfect set of rules for communicating change in every different context, there are general considerations worth noting, and some guidelines for specific situations.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1 Avoid big surprises whenever possible. Prepare the ground well in advance of an announcement. This doesn't mean dropping hints and teasers to create interest for a big announcement. It means, wherever possible, taking staff and volunteers along on the journey towards the decision that's going to be taken. This could involve using your communications channels, where appropriate, to:
- Explain challenges that need addressing in the organisation
- Invite potentially-affected constituencies to air views and ideas
- Consult with stakeholders
- Where possible, report when committees or relevant groups begin talks to reach decisions and report stages in the decision-making process.

2 Timeliness. Don't sit on major decisions. Say as much as you can as soon as you can, to whoever needs to know. In situations where key stakeholders need to find out first, liaise with HR/management to establish who and where these people are and whose job it will be to communicate with them. Use appropriate channels at appropriate points to ensure that those without intranet access (or whatever) hear at the same time as those with access.

3 Be proactive. Whether the change is positive, neutral or negative, be proactive about communicating it and ensure managers who will be key to communicating the change are proactive about it too.

4 Be honest and transparent – to the greatest extent possible.

5 Ensure clarity and context. Be clear and consistent in your messages. At the same time be aware that a diverse and disparate workforce may demand tailored messages to ensure the changes are made clear and relevant to all.

6 Use multiple channels, not just one or two. Ensure a mix of person-to-person, online, written or other tools are used. Depending on the scale of the change to be announced, they might include, for example:

- Regular email and intranet updates
- Visits to different locations by key national, regional or local managers or leaders
- Special staff/volunteer awareness events or Q&A events at national, regional or local level.

7 Keep communicating. A single announcement – or even a single series of announcements, packaged for each constituency of the organisation – won't be enough to ensure understanding, awareness or acceptance of a major change. It will take time and a lot of ongoing communication to get everyone on board with new habits or working patterns.

COMMUNICATING BAD NEWS

All the principles above hold true when there is bad news to share, but you will want to be particularly careful to:

1 Share the news as soon as possible. Ensure those most affected hear first (through their manager and in writing). Work with HR and senior management to follow up with your communications channels to the wider organisation. In a multiple-site organisation, you must check and check again that you have included every group or individual at the right time. Fear, insecurity and distrust are inevitable if people are not told directly about a negative development, but hear about it second hand.

2 Be transparent, informative and sensitive. Recipients of bad news need substantial, relevant and honest information. Sensitivity entails deploying genuine empathy, not fudging difficult truths.

3 Justify why the change has to happen and identify solutions that are being put in place. If there is no justification – for example in the case of an error or piece of malpractice that has lost the charity money – apologise, explain what went wrong and report any remedial action being taken.

4 Offer multiple channels and opportunities for people in different locations and types of work to share concerns, questions and ideas. Make sure they get responses!

5 Communicate hope. In a dispersed organisation, where local volunteer groups or remote field programme staff do not get to pick up anecdotal signals from central or major offices that things are looking up, it is particularly essential to share widely any good news that follows the bad. Any update through team briefing cascades, newsletter, internal social media or any other means can help raise morale.

The Scout Association: Thorough planning helped ease policy change

In 2013 the Scout Association launched an additional alternative Promise for members to take if they do not have any affirmed faith. This was the first time UK Scouting opened up to members who have no faith, therefore we knew there would be some resistance from members who did not want this change to take place or were concerned about what it means for them.

We made sure the launch of this news did not come as a big surprise to members. Consultation took place extensively to get their views and then interim updates were made about the consultation findings so that members were primed on the direction we were likely to take.

We ensured we got feedback and initial reactions from members early on, before launch. This meant we could prepare effectively for launch with an extensive Q&A document for members, and by providing briefing materials to our information centre so they could talk to members in an educated way.

For launch, an email was sent to all members with an email address, and hard copy letters posted to those without an email address, to ensure everyone heard directly from us. Media work followed the next day, so we took care to ensure members were informed first.

All communications directed members to a webpage, where a comprehensive Q&A section helped deal with enquiries.

It was also very important to us that we used the right language. We stressed to members that we were offering an additional option of a Promise that could be taken, not a new Promise; so the wording throughout all communications was very particular referring to an "additional alternative Promise".

There was a specific email address set up for any questions to be sent to, so these could be dealt with quickly by a couple of members of staff who were well-briefed on this topic.

The effort we put into planning these comms paid off. They helped our members stay on board and motivated; they felt we had considered all their needs and they appreciated being equipped with answers and information as soon as they needed it.

Hermione Clulow, internal communications manager, The Scout Association

RSPB: Bringing a new brand to life

In the past three years, the RSPB has adopted a new long-term 'Saving Nature' strategy and developed a new brand – a new visual and verbal identity to close the perception gap between what people think and feel about us and the reality of who we are, what we do and where we're heading.

Success meant not simply communicating with staff and volunteers, but actively enthusing them and giving them a sense of ownership, so that they would bring the strategy and brand to life.

We have a brand champion and leaders in every part of the organisation. In addition, other staff volunteered to be brand advisers, receiving training and then taking responsibility for briefing and enthusing colleagues about the new brand in their part of RSPB. HQ provided the training, structure, key messages and brand resources that people can tap into through our intranet. Local colleagues made it real for the people they work with.

We wanted the strategy to come alive too. We created a 'big picture', literally – a large visual to represent the RSPB: who we are, where we've come from, what we want to achieve and how we'll do it. Region and country teams organised events in locations convenient for their staff and volunteers. Senior RSPB leaders spoke briefly at the start and end of each event, then handed over to local staff who had volunteered to facilitate discussions with up to 10 colleagues at

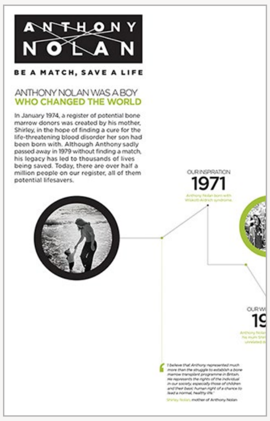
a time, based around the 'big picture'. The volunteer facilitators came from different levels and jobs and it was a great opportunity for them to develop new skills and stretch themselves, as well helping to communicate and embed our Saving Nature strategy.

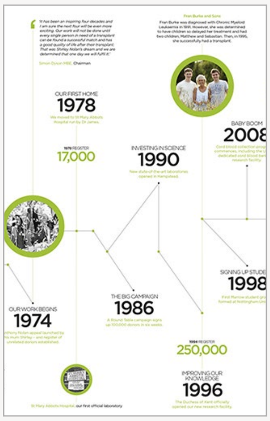
HQ provided training and a carefully-structured facilitator pack, taking everyone on a journey from our history through where we are now and into the future – with quizzes and interactive challenges along the way. But the nature of each discussion was driven by the people round each table, providing a comfortable environment for them to share ideas, learn from each other, ask questions and bring the strategy to life.

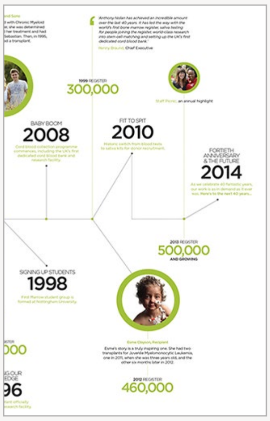
For both the brand and 'big picture' roll-outs, we made sure that materials and sessions were flexible and could be tailored to work for our volunteers. They're an essential part of the RSPB team.

Kay Martin, internal communications manager, RSPB

Anthony Nolan: Looking back, moving forward







Anthony Nolan celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2014. The last five years or so have seen radical changes to our environment and daily work; all aimed at improving the service we offer, and ultimately saving more lives. This milestone year has prompted us to look to the future as well as the past. Our rich history has been as much of an inspiration as our ambitious plans for the future. In many ways this is always true of internal communications – we operate in a continuous present, responding to a combination of memory and desire (actually, it's very much like life!).

When a new chief executive joined the organisation in 2009 the first thing she did was knock down walls. Both literally and metaphorically, divided offices in all our locations were opened up, and gradually staff began to engage more and more with each other. It was evident the charity was full of passionate individuals determined to do great work, but it was time to reassess the way we worked together. Times had changed and it was important for the charity to move forward too. We realised that how we do our work was as important as the work we do.

Change can be a tricky word, with negative connotations. Ultimately however change is necessary and healthy – not change for change's sake, but the continuous shifting of a living organism. So often the task of an internal communicator is related to how we frame a particular situation. It's a continuous process of looking back and moving forward. When we introduced organisational values last year, they were absolutely informed by 40 years of life-saving work, but also aspirational – focused on our future development and success. Significantly they also came out of a sustained process of staff engagement and consultation.

The most important factor for us in successfully communicating change is clarity. Fear of change flourishes where there is an absence of information. We've found it useful to involve staff in our decisions (through brief surveys and self-selecting focus groups) and use their responses to take the temperature of the organisation at key moments.

Fear can come from both sides. Staff members can fear change because it provokes the unknown. Management can fear a loss of engagement due to increased staff dissatisfaction. The best remedy for both potential blockages is an on-going honest conversation about what we stand for, why we do the work we do, and how we can improve every day. Our past provides roots, allowing our future plans to blossom. In the end though, all we have is the present moment. A huge part of our journey has been about coming to realise that, where internal communications is concerned, there is no end-point, just an endless becoming. There is always more work to do.

Our chief executive writes a weekly update email to all staff. Sent out on a Friday, it ensures a visible presence for her and a way of focusing on changes within the organisation. This long-term commitment to open communication is often highlighted by staff as one of their favourite forms of internal communication. Five years ago the walls came down and we began to talk. The conversations continue …

Ben Webb, former internal communications manager, Anthony Nolan

I get no face-time with people at head office

CHALLENGE 8 ►

CHALLENGE 8

When people work in far-flung places, remote not only from head office but also from regional or local centres – and, in many cases, separated from managers and other team members – information-sharing problems are not the only consequences.

Human beings working in close physical proximity pick up facial expressions, body language and emotions from one another. They share day-to-day problems, affirmations, jokes and stories; they bond personally, become familiar at some level with organisational leaders and grow professionally together. These benefits of team working are not always accessible even between people working in different departments at a single location – but coffee machines, canteens, common rooms, deliberate face-to-face meetings and events make up some of the shortfall.

For most charities, nothing like this level of provision can be made for the nurturing of team relationships across multiple sites. Indeed, many groups of staff or volunteers working for your organisation may never meet a central or regional office representative.

As travel budgets decrease and technology flourishes, the problem is increasingly tackled through electronic communication systems – email, Skype, Megameeting (megameeting.com), FaceTime, intranets, teleconferencing, mobile phones and so on. But it's essential to realise that these systems don't address the challenges on their own. On the one hand, if they are used sensitively, consistently and creatively they can achieve a great deal; on the other hand, their limitations have to be recognised and every realistic attempt made to compensate for them.

DISCONNECTED

"Once, I was on my way home from work after a meeting when I stopped in my tracks – I suddenly remembered we had closed the meeting and switched off the lights while the colleague we had been talking to remotely was, quite possibly, still on the line. None of us had asked her for any last comments or said goodbye to her. We had literally forgotten she was there."

Charity manager

MAKING THE MOST OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

1 Most basically, ensure everyone is in the loop. Use your audience checklist (see page 10) to email, SMS, telephone or use other channels, ensuring every constituency hears important organisation-wide news.

2 Thoroughly explore which channels can be used for virtual meetings and where they can be deployed. What is affordable and realistic for your charity? Which groups are in greatest need of which kind of technology? Which will realistically – given local conditions, individual proficiencies and work patterns – be able to access various technologies?

3 Use what you have. Encourage head office teams to set aside time to make Skype, teleconferencing or calls with colleagues in different locations whenever it would be appropriate to do so. Ensure remote colleagues are given plenty of notice so they can arrange to be present at the meeting.

4 Use reliable channels. Frequent screen freezes or connection losses are very frustrating for remote workers and will make them feel under-valued.

5 Try to include remote participants fully in the meeting. Make the effort to ensure they can be heard and can hear what's being said, or can see everyone and be seen. This means allowing for time delays on a line and remaining conscious of the person/people represented by the telephone or screen: an animated debate around the physical table should pause for breath to allow a chance for remote interventions.

6 In international charities, explore ways around time differences. Could a rota system be developed so that Skype or teleconferencing meetings are arranged to suit different time zones?

7 Be deliberate about fostering 'team-bonding' type opportunities through your virtual channels. Include team pages with comment streams and photographs as part of your intranet, Facebook or Yammer systems.

8 In international organisations, find ways to overcome any language barriers – agree which language/s are to be used during phone calls or teleconferences. Explore whether any on-site translators or interpreters among your staff could be deployed to help out at virtual meetings or through communications media. Check regularly to ensure non-native language speakers are following the discussion. Provide written agendas and minutes, translated into appropriate languages where possible, to non-first-language participants.

Of course, flesh-and-blood communication is irreplaceable and should be used wherever appropriate and possible. Encourage key head office figures to exploit any trips they might be taking so that opportunities are taken to hold events for regional staff, or local group visits can be added to the itinerary. Ensure local staff are briefed well in advance of any planned visit so that they can make arrangements to be there.

Many of these difficulties are magnified in the case of those employers who work alone, with no base but home, as our next challenge explores.

Soroptimist International: Using online meetings to facilitate global communication

There are over 3,000 Soroptimist clubs in 130 countries and territories, and a network of volunteer representatives at the major UN centres: Geneva, Nairobi, New York, Paris, Rome and Vienna. An international HQ with five part-time staff is based in Cambridge, UK.

With such a broad geographical scope and extremely limited resources, communication is a major challenge.

We use a lot of online meetings; for example our programme team, with volunteers and staff from at least six countries, meets monthly, while lead representatives from each UN centre meet four times a year.

Finding a time for everyone to 'meet' is a major difficulty given different time zones, not to mention people's other commitments. Midday in Cambridge is 11pm in New Zealand and 7am in New York, so some participants are always going to be dialling in at unsociable times. A dedicated volunteer in Australia once joined a call at 3am! There is no easy answer, but by changing the time of meetings regularly, we try to share the inconvenience.

Varying internet connection speeds and technical ability are also issues. To address these, we've tried out various different online meeting platforms, including Skype, Megameeting and Gotomeeting (gotomeeting.in). Each has different strengths and weaknesses, so it's worth testing them out for your audience. For each meeting, one person needs to be available to manage the technical side of the meeting, helping connect/reconnect people, preferably not the chair or minute-taker as this can take up a lot of time.

Key lessons? Accept that communicating between an international group is difficult, even with modern technology, and invest time in choosing when to hold meetings/what platform to use, helping people to connect and writing up comprehensive minutes.

Anna McCormick, programme manager and Rosi Jack, former communications manager, Soroptimist International

CHALLENGE 9 ►

Your homeworkers are isolated

CHALLENGE 9

The flexibility and independence of homeworking suits a lot of people. But where large numbers of staff and volunteers operate outside any organisational bases, it can be very difficult to avoid dislocation – from the centre and from colleagues at all levels. Homeworkers may not benefit from regular interactions with colleagues and they can easily start to feel disconnected, unsupported and even excluded from the life of your charity.

It's essential that deliberate and regular steps are taken to bring homeworkers into the fold, keep them in touch with key developments, hear their views and updates and make them feel valued.

First, it's important to understand your homeworkers' needs. Find out:

1 Do they have close colleagues living and working nearby or are they entirely alone in their work?

2 What line management or group leadership structure are they part of?

3 What systems are in place to facilitate regular meetings and communication in that structure?

4 Do they have, or do your charity's resources allow them to be issued with, mobile phones, laptops and webcams?

5 Are they living and working in an urban or rural area, with or without signal coverage or constant electricity?

6 How do they feel about the communications and support they already receive from the centre, regional networks and local groups?

7 What level of further support and communications do they feel they need, or would like?

8 What kind of communications would they rather avoid? Don't make assumptions – not every homeworker wants to join your intranet chat group!

Ensuring connectivity

The key connections are between staff/volunteers, their managers and members of their team. Is there anything that can be done to facilitate these connections? Most importantly, you will want to be sure homeworkers are accessing regular meetings with line managers and colleagues – something that once again demands that you have influence with HR and senior management in your organisation.

Just as for all staff in your charity, meetings between line managers and homeworkers should include briefings about organisational and departmental developments. It's important that some of these meetings involve face-to-face contact if possible, but a formal schedule of meetings may also need to include telephone calls or Skype meetings. Ideally there will be plenty of informal contact made with your homeworkers too.

Homeworkers selection box

An engaging package of communications for your homeworkers could include elements they can opt in or out of, as well as essential channels for staying in touch:

1 Homeworking networks, in the form of regular meet-ups, intranet pages, social media, email lists etc.

2 A communications buddy system ensuring homeworkers have their own go-to person to help keep them in the loop.

3 Meetings/events/roadshows for homeworkers at the local, regional or national level, run in person by key staff groups and managers.

4 A homeworker locations database, which could be used to alert head office or regional managers to staff working close to any locations they will be visiting. A local 'meet and greet' event or a quick meeting could be arranged.

5 Faces and stories of homeworkers should be included when opportunities arise in any newsletters, intranet posts etc.

6 Intranet 'team pages' – either homeworking teams or teams that include homeworkers and on-site workers.

7 Virtual common rooms. Intranet/social media pages where workers can share more personal chat/photos etc.

8 Staff awards or recognition schemes with a specific category for homeworkers.

National Deaf Children's Society: Combating isolation

Almost a third of staff at the National Deaf Children's Society work from home. Many staff are also deaf and therefore may be unable to use a phone, instead relying on email or MSN to keep in touch. Our homeworkers told us that they sometimes feel forgotten by their colleagues, left out of the 'water cooler chat' in the main offices and isolated.

To start to improve things for our homeworkers, we set up several initiatives:

- **An 'all homeworkers' email address** which we use to canvass views, address any concerns and, importantly, show that we take their particular issues seriously.
- **A homeworker map** This was an idea from one of our homeworkers. She suggested a Google map of homeworker locations would be helpful so staff could arrange to meet a colleague nearby when visiting a new area. Homeworkers were given the option of being included on the map, which most were happy to do. The map only gives rough locations, so that staff didn't feel pressure to give out their home address.
- **A calendar of social events and networking opportunities** This is accessible to all staff through Outlook calendars. We put any events in early so homeworking staff can see what's happening in offices and arrange visits to coincide with any events they want to take part in.
- **Communicator of the Year awards** We introduced an annual award to highlight and celebrate good communicators across the organisation. We had an office worker category and a homeworker category, as we didn't want homeworkers to be overlooked because they have less contact with colleagues. All staff were able to nominate via the intranet and the winners were announced publicly.
- **Thank you for being brilliant!** Taking inspiration from the 'Good Deed Feed' in *The Metro* newspaper, we created a weekly column in our e-newsletter so that staff can submit short messages of thanks to their colleagues. This is extremely popular, with more than 150 submissions in the first year and the column is often over-subscribed. It highlights good communication and the support that colleagues give one another. It is widely used by staff across the country.

Over the next few years we're going to trial the Yammer social network, set up a homeworker-support network and work with IT to improve Skype access for all staff.

Jenny Heylin-Smith, senior designer, NDCS

Senior managers are not on board

CHALLENGE 10 ►

CHALLENGE 10

Communications play a key part in every effort made to inform, motivate and inspire loyalty among staff and volunteers in your charity, throughout head office and in all other locations. However, the task of engaging employees in this way demands of the communicator a high level of strategic involvement and influence.

The term ‘employee engagement’ was defined in the government-commissioned paper *Engaging for Success* (David Macleod and Nita Clarke, 2009) as “a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of wellbeing.”

Macleod and Clarke also provided some pointers for making engagement happen, which illustrate the dynamics of leadership, strategy and influence that are at play.

ENABLERS OF ENGAGEMENT

- Visible, empowering leadership providing a **strong strategic narrative** about the organisation, where it’s come from and where it’s going.
- **Engaging managers** who focus their people and give them scope, treat their people as individuals and coach and stretch their people.
- There is **employee voice** throughout the organisation, for reinforcing and challenging views, between functions and externally; employees are seen as central to the solution.
- There is **organisational integrity** – the values on the wall are reflected in day-to-day behaviours. There is no ‘say-do’ gap.

Taken from Engage for Success: *engageforsuccess.org*

However, these key enabling factors are not immediately accessible to every charity communicator.

While an increasing number of organisations run discreet internal comms departments reporting directly to the chief executive, for many charities an IC function exists only as an add-on to an external comms or HR role. At the same time, personnel who carry out IC tasks do not themselves always command senior management positions.

Such difficulties create a challenging enough situation for communicators working in a single location. Where your influence needs to spread through and beyond head office – to multiple sites around the country or even around the world – an absence of managerial status or influence will be felt even more acutely.

MANAGEMENT BUY-IN: AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY

> "The CEO or managing director is a key person in any employee communication. They should communicate frequently and in person. They should also be willing to address challenging questions, listen carefully, deal with concerns and respond quickly to sensitive topics."
>
> ***Dennis Rutzou PR*** *(drpr.com.au)*

Perhaps you are working in a communications role without a strategy endorsed by your senior management team (SMT). Perhaps you find yourself setting up promising communications channels that experience low take-up.

Pause for a moment and ask yourself: are you paying due heed to the importance of management involvement in your communications? Have you fostered strong relationships with management – and with the HR department, which puts management policy into practice?

How many of the key management communications pathways (see checklist right) are flourishing in different locations around your organisation?

Whether or not you report in to your senior management team, you'll find yourself in many situations where you will be seeking management endorsement. You might be working for greater transparency, urging speedier reporting of bad news, explaining the need for better communications by different layers of management around the organisation, or just seeking backing for a new project.

A strong standing with senior management involves an ongoing relationship. You should ideally be in a position where you expect, for example, to contribute regularly to management briefings, or to devise your own regular comms update for managers all over the organisation.

If you don't already have regular meetings or any kind of formal relationship with senior management or HR, you will need to take the initiative to get things started. Perhaps you could identify a sponsor who can help you with this.

MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT CHECKLIST

1 The CEO and senior management team articulate a clear vision for your charity, which is heard, read or seen by staff and volunteers in all locations.

2 The CEO and SMT buy in to the importance of internal communications in the organisation and encourage managers in all locations to do the same.

3 CEO/SMT meet regularly with internal communicators, listen to their advice and involve them in early stages of planning for new initiatives and big announcements.

4 CEO/SMT are committed to a culture of transparency and act as role models; their own updates to all parts of the organisation are honest, timely and relevant. Where possible, significant information is not withheld from staff/volunteers.

5 CEO/SMT are personally involved in regular updates to the entire organisation, through for example:
- CEO's weekly/monthly message/blog
- Contributing information to a team briefing system
- Appearing at staff/volunteer events/roadshows

6 Where appropriate, CEO/SMT offer consultation with and respond to feedback from staff and volunteers.

7 CEO/SMT expect managers throughout the organisation to communicate regularly with their line reports.

8 Line managers/volunteer leaders in all locations conduct useful, informative meetings and briefings with their staff/volunteers.

9 Senior managers are visible, listening and creating opportunities for the voices of staff and volunteers to be heard – through attendance in person at meetings or events, or through virtual meetings and events where necessary.

10 Emphasis is given to good personal communication skills and line managers are given training where appropriate.

BUILDING A LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIP

As a communicator, you will be critical in creating the compelling strategic narrative that will allow people in your organisation to make a connection between their role and what the organisation is trying to achieve. This is especially important where you have people working in different locations, where local priorities may not present the entire organisational picture and where the centre or HQ may be a distant entity to many.

If you haven't currently got that great a relationship with your senior managers, now's the time to go for it. If you are starting from square one, you will probably want to set up something small and simple: get some time with members of the senior management team and ask them to talk to you about the organisation's vision, strategy, plans and priorities.

In requesting this initial meeting, you may want to explain to the leadership team that you want to be in a position to communicate their vision to others more effectively, so that staff and volunteers all over the charity become more engaged in organisational objectives.

At the same time, you can start to build a deeper, less transactional relationship. In all your interactions with the leadership team, try to demonstrate great questioning and consulting skills – getting under the skin of what they're saying to find what is really important.

Demonstrate your credibility and soon your relationship will start to shift; hopefully you will begin to find that you can help not only to communicate the vision but to shape it as well. Remember that you are the expert in your field and you can bring insights that your leadership team may not have.

Rob Bridges, communications manager, Engage for Success

POOLING RESOURCES

"At WSPA (now World Animal Protection), we set up an organisational development group, which included an IC adviser, head of HR, and finance director (who, unusually, led on this area and did it brilliantly). We met regularly to share planning for organisational change, and also for mutual support."

Ali Lyons, communications consultant

Winning the argument

With or without a formal relationship, you will often find yourself in the position of having to convince senior managers to back your ideas. Of course there is no fail-safe formula for winning a reluctant CEO or SMT over to your cause, but here's a reminder of some of the classic behaviours of influential people.

1 **Have conviction** – do you truly believe your idea is interesting, worthwhile and achievable? Will it really make a difference? If not, abandon it.

2 **Prepare thoroughly** to present your case. Your inspirational proposal will collapse at the first stony-faced response if you cannot back it up with practical arguments, facts and figures (survey findings, for example).

3 **Be clear and concise:** you are, after all, the comms expert!

4 **Anticipate rejection** and prepare responses to likely objections.

5 **Understand and empathise** with the people you are attempting to persuade; tap in to their language, personality, needs or interests.

6 **Don't exaggerate** your prospects of success – it will backfire.

7 **Be upbeat,** even in the event of failure. By keeping your dealings with management cheerful, friendly, helpful and appreciative you will eventually reap the rewards.

8 **Be persistent.** If you're convinced of the importance of your proposal, seek opportunities for another bite at the cherry. In the meantime, work on overcoming obstacles and building up more evidence for your case.

9 **Follow up meetings** punctually and act on outcomes.

10 **Build rapport** with key people in every region where your charity operates; you can't have too many high-level allies.

Making the best of what you've got

For comms people working in charities where there is no separate IC function, and possibly no formal relationship with management, there is no need to give up hope – you may just need a few extra tricks up your sleeve. Many do amazing things with limited staff and management resources. Internal comms working groups made up of willing staff from around the organisation can work well, given sufficient encouragement from the communications team and support from charity leaders.

National Deaf Children's Society: Doing it 'Together'

Many larger charities have a dedicated resource to drive and improve internal communications, but this isn't always possible in small or medium-sized charities. Staff may feel that internal communications is an add-on to their job description, or it may be overlooked altogether.

At the National Deaf Children's Society, the whole communications team takes responsibility for internal communications. We produce our weekly staff e-newsletter, and manage the intranet, lunchtime seminars and the staff working group – 'Together'.

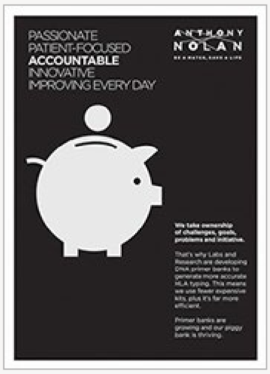
By setting up Together we wanted to highlight and improve day-to-day communication between staff by bringing together a range of existing and new activities with an internal awareness raising campaign. Activities are both formal and informal. It's worked well for us and we've had lots of positive feedback.

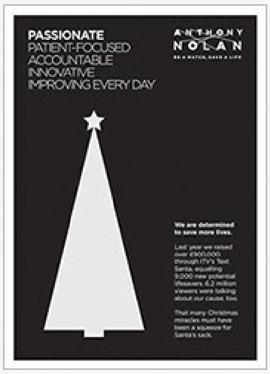
Top tips for creating an internal communications working group

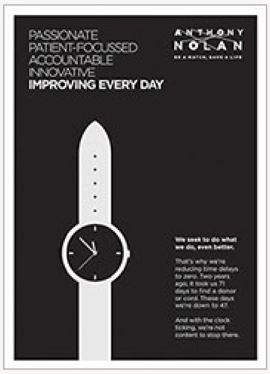
- Everyone knows who the 'do-ers' and social butterflies are in their organisation; ask them to join the task group and use their enthusiasm, social knowledge and drive for positive change to get started.
- Encourage staff from all levels of the organisation to get involved. If the group only contains senior staff it could be seen as very official and dry. Likewise if it contains only junior staff, it may not have the weight it needs to persuade senior staff to support it.
- As with all new initiatives, help your senior staff understand what you are trying to achieve and why it's needed. Without their support, staff won't be able to dedicate time to it.
- Set up a neutral email address – ours was together@ndcs.org.uk – which means everyone feels able to contribute easily without any feelings of "I don't know that person so I can't email them."
- Turn frustrated people into 'change makers' and encourage them to come to you with their ideas.
- Don't expect change overnight. This is a cultural change and that always takes longer than you think.

Jenny Heylin-Smith, senior designer, NDCS

Anthony Nolan: Senior managers and engagement







In 2011 Anthony Nolan entered the *Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For* survey for the first time. We decided to do this largely because it would enable us to benchmark ourselves against similar organisations. Since that first entry, we have entered the survey twice more, progressing from "one to watch" to inclusion in the top 100.

The survey lets us take the temperature of the organisation. It provides some useful data and clues to what it's like to work here and ultimately enables us to improve staff experience.

One of the clearest signals coming out of our most recent survey was information about how our senior management team could enhance and improve their leadership offer. While they received positive feedback as divisional leaders, there was some helpful feedback in terms of organisational leadership and visibility of the top team. It led us to conclude that we needed to enhance the presence and interaction of SMT members with staff. Luckily, SMT recognised this and were keen to develop, grow and improve their engagement across the organisation.

As internal communications manager I developed a range of options to help our senior managers do this. From this list of 24, they each picked three which they would commit to in the coming year. I then worked with them all to plan a timetable so there was a good balance of activity across the year. I also met each senior manager to discuss what practical support and guidance they might need. It's easy to forget that although senior managers are by definition experienced in their field, they are not necessarily experts or confident in communicating and engaging as a leader across the organisation. One of the major benefits of this project has been helping them develop these skills. It has given them the time, space and focus to make significant changes. The hope is that having had a chance to widen their circle of experience, engagement will become part of their everyday interactions.

Good internal communications is like a radio station, always playing, that people can tune in and out of whenever they want or need to. It's about keeping up a steady input and output of information, and providing varied opportunities for and points of access. Internal communications is not magic. It's not necessarily even expertise. It's listening, responding, using common sense, being present, collaborating and moving forward. Our senior management team understood the theory of engagement; they had many of the necessary skills. It just took the gentle nudge of a focused project and the opportunity to experiment and put the theory into practice to give them permission to get out there, get to know the organisation better, and to share more of who they are and what they do.

Whenever we survey Anthony Nolan staff about why they work here or what makes Anthony Nolan special, the answers often come back to the idea of an "Anthony Nolan feeling". It's difficult to define, but it has elements of doing good work, in good company, making a difference, and feeling part of something bigger than ourselves. It's an amazing feeling. You can't label it or bottle it, but on a good day you really can feel it. People want to be engaged. All we have to do is get out there and give them the chance.

Ben Webb, former internal communications manager, Anthony Nolan

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