

20 lessons from... years in communications

#1

Communication
is the
first step
in everything

How important is comms?

Well... You've just created a new strategy... or change program... or product... or process... or anything else.

What's the first thing you do?

You tell people about it. You get them on board. Let them know what you're hoping they'll do.

In other words, you communicate.

And how well you communicate will go a long way to determining the future success of that strategy or change or product or process.

I'd say that makes comms pretty important.

#2

Communication
brings people
together

The two people on opposite sides of the desk thrashing out a deal. The CEO engaging employees at a town hall. The Intranet article or public blog making a big announcement. The campaign building trial of a product.

Comms is all about getting people on the same page.

I love the phrase that a colleague and I used to use... The power of us.

Comms is about unleashing the power of us.

That's why I'm so interested in strategic alignment.

#3

Silos

are our worst
enemy

They exist everywhere. People working in little blocs, not aware of (and/or caring about) what else is going on in the world around them.

Too worried about how important their little empire is without considering the big picture.

Silos lead to overcommunication, conflicts, disconnection... and that's just the comms.

Across the entire organisation, they cost dearly in so many ways including inefficiency, confusion and lack of clarity, lack of alignment, collaboration and agility, resourcing challenges and so much more.

Do you want to break down the silos in your organisation? Then start by breaking down the silos in the way the organisation communicates.

It won't solve the problem but it's a good step forward.

#4

Soft

is the new hard

The more organisations automate, the more vanilla they become.

As such, the key differentiator becomes people more than ever – the decisions they make and the things they do.

That means all those so called 'soft' parts of the business like T&C and Comms become more critical than ever.

Oh, and to anyone who thinks the 'soft' skills are easy, think again. Building a united team is pretty much the hardest thing any organisation can do.

In fact, a 2015 McKinsey study found that 'implementing material changes to organizational culture' and 'creating a shared vision and alignment around strategic direction across the organization' were the most difficult things an incoming exec could do.

#5

Simple

is hard too
(but really
important)

Why write a paragraph when you can communicate it in a sentence?

Unfortunately, many of us (including me) occasionally lapse into excessively complex language.

Sometimes it's because we don't understand the big picture. Or we're wedded to the jargon or to flowery language.

Or because we're trying to slam too much of the lower level detail in. Or because someone feels their bit just has to be in there.

Or one of about 50 other reasons.

And, sometimes, it's just because communicating simply is actually quite hard. It's one of the true ironies of comms. Complex is much, much easier than simple.

But it's simple, not complex, that gets the cut through.

So, ask yourself every time... "how can I simplify this?"

Your audience will appreciate it.

#6

More comms

does not

equal

better comms

Message not getting through? No probs. Let's throw more comms at it.

NO.

The reason why it's so hard to get cut through these days is that people are drowning in information... comms... messages... stuff.

More comms isn't the answer. That just makes things worse.

Be smart. Be clear and simple. Respect the audience.

#7

WIIFM

is everything

Everybody looks at business communication through a 'what's in it for me' lens. Why should I care? Why should I do this?

Getting the WIIFM – the audience benefit – right is the single most important piece of any communication.

It can also be the trickiest.

#8

You can

polish a td**
(but not for long)

Turns out you can spin your way into success or out of trouble. People do it all the time.

The problem is that spin isn't sustainable. Try to keep it going and you'll get found out eventually.

Good comms may seem like a replacement for bad practices or performance, but it isn't. Not in the long run anyway.

Spin sucks.

As a CEO I used to work with would say... "Do the right thing and talk about it."

#9
Ultimately,
there's only
one story

I once read an amusing article about a long since forgotten agency's website.

In the 'About' section, it talked about how serious the agency was. Serious people. Serious skills. Serious process.

But, on the Why Work For Us page, they pitched themselves as party central with pinball machines blah blah blah.

You are one organisation. You only have one story.

And that story needs to resonate across every message and every channel to every member of your audience (internal and external).

If you're not adding to the organisation's story, you're weakening it.

#10

Stories

are awesome...
in their place

When I have my speechwriter's hat on, I love researching stories an executive could use to bring their speech to life.

Those stories can add real power to a speech. And, so I've been told, make it much more satisfying to deliver. They can also be fun (and educational) to write.

Having said that, it's easy to OD on stories.

Think about the channel. Think about the ask. Think about the audience.

People are busy. Sometimes, they just want the nuts and bolts.

#11

Start at the end

There's so much talk in the comms community about delivering business, not just comms, goals.

As there should be.

Here's a simple tip. The outcomes you achieve (or don't achieve) are defined right back at the beginning when you scope your project.

So, imagine yourself sometime in the future presenting to the Exec and senior leaders about the success of your project.

What do you want to say? What needle do you want to show them you moved?

You just defined your business goals (and metrics).

#12

I love the
smell of
a plan
in the morning

Took me years to get there but now I love planning. Love Jira. Love all that.

Start a project with a plan. Start the day with a plan.

What are you trying to achieve? Who should be involved? What are the steps you need to take? What will you measure?

Careful planning will keep you on track. It will engage stakeholders and limit surprises. It will stop you all going insane. And, rather than locking you in, it can help you be more agile.

Three important pieces of advice.

First, never lose sight of the big picture. It helps you make sure that the tactics you're executing are the right ones.

Second, don't take on too much. You can't plan your way out of overwork. No matter what you do, your work (and ultimately you) will suffer.

Third, 'of mice and comms professionals' is real. There will always be those days when other priorities get in the way.

Get over it and move on.

#13

Words are our
craft, but

numbers

are our business

Performance data doesn't always tell you what you want to hear. But it does tell you what you need to hear.

If you ignore or cherry pick the data, you miss the opportunity to really understand what's going on. And you miss the opportunity to improve or fine tune what you're doing.

Watching and acting on the data is one of the best ways to turn a loser into a winner.

One word of warning. There is an awful lot of junk data out there. This is particularly true for a lot of the performance data thrown out by digital platforms.

So do some independent double checking. Is this datapoint worth the paper (or screen) it's written on... or not?

#14
Give the
rules
the finger
(sometimes)

Yes, I'm a maverick, in a lame, bookworm, plastic pen holder in the top pocket sort of way.

In the eyes of some English language traditionalists, my habit of starting sentences with conjunctions is a disgrace. Why do I do it? It comes from my years as a speechwriter. It may not be proper grammar but it's the way people talk.

I've also been known to ignore apparently hard and fast web usability rules like 'every piece of content should be within three clicks of the home page'.

Every situation is different. Who's delivering the message? Who's the audience and what's their need and situation? What's the desired outcome? What channel?

These factors, which vary widely, need to guide your decisions... not generic, one size fits all principles.

#15

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

There are two parts to this lesson. Here's part one.

My first. comms leader taught me there is no such thing as perfection when it comes to writing for comms. It's a mirage. It sits out there and tempts you but, no matter how hard you try, you'll never reach it Because it doesn't exist.

So much time is wasted when we tinker, fidget and, in general, muck around with what we're writing (I know... I used to do heaps of it and still get caught occasionally). We think we're making things better when we often aren't. In fact, we might end up making things worse. AND we're holding everyone up. AND we're wasting time that could be used for other things.

Sure, make an effort to fine tune and improve. But know when to call time. Otherwise you'll spend all your days chasing perfection and getting nowhere.

And, here's part 2.

I'm what you might call a 'light touch' reviewer. If I'm reviewing someone else's work, I will change obvious errors of fact or protocol or grammatical errors (overly long sentences is a favourite of mine... they're hard to follow).

What I try very to avoid, however, is changing the way a person has written something simply because 'I would write it a bit differently'. Especially if that person is another comms professional.

The truth is we ALL write differently. Just because I would word something slightly differently does not make mine better. Thinking it does is just tinkering that wastes time. It can also be quite disrespectful.

If you're going to review someone else's comms, get clear in your own mind where the line is. And try like crazy to avoid crossing it.

#16 Never stop studying

I know it's a hackneyed phrase, but the pace of change is accelerating. There is no status quo anymore. If you're not moving forward, you're going backward.

This applies to everything... particularly to learning. To keep up with your chosen craft (be it comms or anything else) you need to keep studying... whether you like it or not.

One thing you can do to make this easier is to think about the most effective and enjoyable modes of study FOR YOU.

I learnt a few years ago that there are two forms of study that work for me.

The first probably applies to all of us... on the job.

The second is a bit left field for many... creating research papers. To date I've done four (AI and comms, strategic alignment x 2 and the role of comms in the strategy review process).

Even writing these 20 lessons has been a great learning experience. Thinking these lessons through has helped me clarify what's important.

Anyway, that's what works for me, but that doesn't mean it will for you.

So, think about how you learn and get on it.

And, most importantly, never stop studying.

#17
Remember
who
you're
writing for

The first speech I ever wrote was about entrepreneurship. For obvious reasons, the speech included the word 'entrepreneurship' quite a few times.

Sadly, I didn't find out until he actually gave the speech, that the CEO struggled to say the word entrepreneurship. Lesson learned.

Some people want bullet points or even just slides. Some want speeches written verbatim. Some want to begin with a verbatim speech and then convert into bullet points.

I once wrote a speech for a Chairman who memorised it and gave it word for word... with pretty much no prompt. It was extraordinary!

Everyone is different. If you're creating comms for someone to deliver, get very clear on their preferences and how they work.

Having said that, never forget that, ultimately, you're writing for the audience.

#18
There's
more
to comms
than comms

For obvious reasons, comms is widely associated with amplifying the voice of the organisation and its leaders.

But, what about the flip side? The decision support we can provide senior leaders based on our understanding of a wide cross section of important but diverse stakeholders?.

Stakeholders who, these days more than ever, can have a profound impact on a company's performance, reputation and valuation

Done well, this insight has got to be at least as important as our other activities.

But it's a function of comms we rarely hear about.

Why is that?

#19
Comms
needs a
new name

I say this for two reasons.

First up, I'd love the profession to have a name more aligned to the outcomes we deliver rather than what we do. As an example, think of the move over the last few decades from 'Human Resources' to 'People and Culture' or 'Talent and Culture'.

A shift like this might help to focus people on outcomes, not just activity. And, by people, I mean both our stakeholders and ourselves.

Second, the truth is that everyone is a communicator. Pretty much everyone we work with is communicating in one way or another every minute of the day. So everyone can lay claim to some degree of communication experience.

This makes the delineation between what we do and what those around us do every day, a little hard to spot. It needs to be much more obvious.

#20
People leaders
need
MORE

After 20 years working across comms, strategy and a number of other disciplines, I believe this is the most important lesson I've learnt.

The role that people leaders play in an organisation is inestimable.

They are critical to execution, alignment, performance, engagement, culture, the development and welfare of their people and so much more. Oh... and communications.

They are powerful influencers and advocates.

And, importantly, they know their audience. Not as segments or personas, but as people.

Of course, people leaders are human. And, like all humans, they need support. Unfortunately, many don't get it.

Many organisations don't adequately prepare people leaders for the role they need to play (a role that continually changes as they move up the ladder). In fact, in some cases I've seen, the people leaders' role isn't even properly defined. It's just assumed they know it.

At the same time, people leaders are often slammed with so many (often conflicting) demands that even Escher, Rubik or Turing would be flummoxed.

So, people leaders need more. More clarity. More enabling and training. More prioritisation. And more effective tools and processes.

Consider it an investment in the performance and success of the organisation and the wellbeing of all its people.