by Andy Szpekman

When Bank of America realized that multiple communication departments were engaged in a message-generation arms race, it created an Associate Communications group to turn down the noise. Key to achieving this group's objective is the skill set of communication project managers, defined by a communication competency model.

BUILDING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

What communicators need to do to succeed

Bank of America, the largest bank in the US, with US$656 billion in assets, is integrating and simplifying communication to its 155,000 employees (known internally as associates). Previously, multiple communication departments supported various parts of the company, with little coordination. This arrangement resulted in a profusion of noise and clutter, with random, frequently redundant messages landing on people's desks.

To remedy this situation, Bank of America recently created a new group, called Associate Communications. A collection of about 75 professionals from across the company, this team provides everything from communication planning, project management and measurement to writing, editing, design and production management for a wide array of internal communication projects.

Reporting to corporate affairs, Associate Communications supports communication initiatives generated by personnel, marketing, corporate affairs, and technology and operations, which collectively generate an estimated 70 percent of the non-business-unit-specific messages that associates receive. Examples include product-promotion announcements, workplace policy reminders, and fund-raising campaigns. Over the coming months, Associate Communications will support other parts of the company as well.

Makes sense in theory

Associate Communications' mission is to reduce noise and clutter. Specifically, it aims to produce communication and coordinate messages more efficiently across the company, and to target more relevant information to recipients, thereby enhancing associates' overall communication experience. The ultimate objective is to offer richer, more manageable information, so that associates spend more time focusing on customers and clients and less time sorting through marginally relevant information.

While almost everybody in the company publicly acknowledges the importance of this mission, actually accomplishing it is a huge

KEYPOINTS

- Bank of America had multiple communication departments generating messages, which created noise and clutter for associates.
- A new group, Associate Communications, was formed to correct this situation by coordinating messages and targeting communication.
- This group would have the tough job of convincing message generators that some of their communication may be irrelevant to associates, who needed instead to concentrate on clients and customers.
- A key driver of the new group's work would be the communication project managers, who would have to possess a certain skill set.
- To help select project managers, the organization defined a communication competency model.
- This process defined key competency indicators in five areas: business knowledge; communication planning; change management; research, writing and editing; and project management.
- Bank of America then developed an interview guide to measure these competencies (see page 31).
- The company also uses a leadership model, which specifies desired behaviors for all associates and supports the bank's core values.
- The communication model is used not just for recruitment, but as an ongoing professional development tool.

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challenge. This is because no one feels that their own communication constitutes "noise and clutter," which is often perceived as "what others create." So to cut through the noise, message generators look for ever-more ways to capture people's attention, a tactic which escalates into an internal communications arms race.

Meanwhile, the same folks who nodded enthusiastically when you told them the goals of the new Associate Communications group, look aghast when you pooh-pooh their idea to produce a 20-minute video about a new business unit strategy and distribute copies to all associates. Or try suggesting that the postcard complementing the Web announcement that complements the brochure may be a bit excessive. You're likely to hear some variation of: "Yes, I see your point, but in this case…"

So, what's at play here? Are message generators intent on clogging the system with useless information? Not at all. They're simply trying to use communication to further their personal business objectives. Since someone might miss the message the first time, they reason, why not repeat it five more times in five different ways? While the urge to do this is understandable, it's directly at odds with what associates are saying, which is: "Stop sending us so much meaningless information."

This problem heightens the importance of a key role in our Associate Communications group – that of the communication project manager. These are the folks who work closely with internal clients to set communication strategies and oversee project deliverables. They are charged with pushing back when communication seems unwarranted or excessive, and with finding the right solution to influence associate behavior.

When filling these critical positions, we look for a unique blend of technical skills, on-the-job experiences and personal attributes. To ensure the right people are selected, we've developed a communication competency model.

Brought to you by the military

Competency models identify behaviors that top performers in a given position will exhibit on the job. The models – used frequently in employee selection and development – are based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. The rigorous standard methodology for creating competency models dates back to a research technique developed by psychologist John Flanagan during World War II.

Flanagan, the first US Air Force psychologist, pioneered the "critical-incident" method of personnel selection. In an early application of this technique, he asked bomber crew members to describe their actions, thoughts and feelings during in-flight events. Flanagan then set out to analyze whether personal characteristics of bomber crews correlated with casualty rates. He found there was indeed a link.

Psychologist David McClelland went on to adapt the critical-incident method to study management behavior. Through a series of in-depth interviews with outstanding and average performers, McClelland and his colleagues sought to reveal the underlying factors that make someone successful. These interviews, which took two to three hours and covered four to six key situations, were tape recorded, transcribed and meticulously studied.

Key communication competencies

To create our communication competency model, Bank of America did none of that. Instead, representatives from Associate Communications and Leadership Development benchmarked communication practices of companies we admire, sorted through the ▷

literature to see what the experts were saying about critical communication competencies, and turned to colleagues and consultants outside the company for advice. We also brainstormed to ensure that we factored in those communication competencies clearly necessary in our environment. We came up with key competency indicators in the following areas:
1. business knowledge;
2. communication planning;
3. change management;
4. research, writing and editing;
5. project management.

1. Business knowledge

It's crucial that communicators understand the company's culture – in effect their operating environment – and that they understand the business objectives of key client groups. They need to link organizational initiatives to marketplace events and anticipate any shifts in the business environment, assessing their potential impact. It's also important for communicators to build close relationships with business leaders and key information generators.

2. Communication planning

Here, communicators should provide a candid assessment of the issues and make clear, impactful recommendations. They need to align resources with business priorities and test clients' assumptions – including pushing back when appropriate. They must also champion associates' needs by developing communication that's grounded in associates' perceptions and tailored to their levels of interest and understanding. Proven communication models should be used to move people from awareness to understanding, and then to commitment and action.

Communicators also need to be comfortable with measurement and assessment, piloting and recalibrating communication before broad implementation and, after implementation, monitoring the degree to which people have taken the desired action.

3. Change management

Communicators should champion change. This involves assessing the likely impact of planned change on various audiences, analyzing audience attitudes and needs for information and helping people to manage the change. Key competencies here include:

- gathering input and advice from those responsible for implementing change;
- connecting ideas and information to set a context for change;
- conveying the purpose of change, a picture of the future, a plan to get there and an explanation of individual roles in the plan;
- creating opportunities for people to explore, test and understand the implications of an important change; and
- equipping the organization with tools to effectively communicate and implement planned changes.

4. Research, writing and editing

Basic technical skills, ie. the ability to produce clear and compelling information, are also essential. At the start of communication projects, gather facts and information through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires or internal and external networks. Often, copy needs to be written and edited effectively for print or electronic media. And messages need to be designed and organized for clarity, brevity, simplicity and consistency.

5. Project management

The final core competency for communicators is managing projects, including negotiation and

then explanation of project goals, deliverables, timing and accountabilities. Communicators must determine and secure the human and financial resources required to meet project goals, and ensure that key project events and milestones stay on track and within budget. Finally, they need to leverage project learnings to create communication tools and templates.

Bank of America developed an interview guide to measure these competencies (see Figure 1, right). When using this guide, we find it helpful to tell candidates up-front what competencies are required for the job. We also state that we'll be asking a series of questions to determine the degree to which the person possesses these competencies. There's no reason to be secretive about what you're trying to assess. Either candidates will describe how they have applied the relevant competencies or they won't. It's very tough to fake it, especially when the interviewer keeps probing for details. And keep in mind, what the person chooses to discuss can be just as revealing as the substance of the discussion.

Desired behaviors

As a final point, it's worth noting that Bank of America also uses a "leadership model" that specifies desired behaviors – such as promoting teamwork, listening non-defensively, and learning from mistakes. These behaviors support our core values and apply to all associates. This model was developed through in-depth interviews with senior executives and other leaders and refined by an executive review team. The leadership model is the basis for 360-degree feedback, and has been used in leadership training programs and adapted for a more junior, supervisory population.

Successful communicators – like everyone else in the company – need to demonstrate the desired leadership behaviors. Our communication model was meant to supplement the leadership model, addressing only the communication-specific behaviors that are critical for success.

In addition to using the communication model for recruitment, we've begun to apply it as a professional development tool, working to ensure that anyone charged with planning and producing associate communication already possesses, or is developing, the requisite skills. Still, professional development will only get you so far. It seems the likelihood of success rises substantially when someone starts out with the competencies to excel on the job. As the saying goes, you can train a turkey to climb a tree, but it's cheaper to hire a squirrel. **SCM**

Figure One: Determining communication competencies

Communication Competencies Interview Guide
This is your checklist of questions. Make sure the candidate:

❏ **Knows the business**
Tell me about a time when you started a new job and had to learn the business. What did you do?
Tell me about a project you were involved with that had a significant business impact.
How have you used communication to solve business problems?

❏ **Develops communication plans that have an impact**
Describe a time when you were involved in creating a new communication process.
Can you give me an example of a situation in which you "pushed back" on a client and the client resisted?
What types of communication approaches have you found work best in different situations? For instance, when does printed communication tend to be most effective, face-to-face, etc?

❏ **Champions change**
How have you built support for a change initiative?
What's the biggest obstacle you've encountered while communicating change?
What tools and approaches have you found helpful to communicate change?

❏ **Produces clear and compelling communications**
Describe the types of writing projects you've been involved with.
Describe a situation in which you had to summarize a large volume of data to present conclusions and recommendations.
What research techniques have you used to plan, pilot test or measure the effectiveness of communication?

❏ **Manages projects**
Tell me about a complex project you were responsible for managing.
How have you handled an assignment in which you had a detailed plan, but events changed during implementation?
Think of a time when you worked as a project team member. What did you do to further the success of the project?

Note: Probe to determine the candidate's role, what he or she said, did, thought and felt during an event, and the outcome.

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