Ask the Expert

Q: I'm an internal communication manager in a sales and marketing department of around 350 people. Our managing director has 10 directors on his board. He's an effective communicator to the whole department but one of the problems he experiences is getting his directors to convey his messages to their teams. This is probably because the directors are extremely busy and focused on revenue.

Please can you suggest any methods that will help engage the directors (who are all senior people) and ensure they communicate the messages from the managing director? And how will we know they're doing it?

A: To address the problem, I would explore three issues:

1. *Do the messages add value?* The directors don't seem to think so, or at least not enough value to justify taking the time to communicate them. Otherwise, they would do so without any further prompting. Since the messages are coming from the MD, I have to imagine he believes they add value. So the key is articulating the link between the messages and directors' self interests. For example, you might relate the messages to helping people bring in new business, be more productive, feel more engaged, and so forth. Provide anecdotes, statistics, examples at other companies – anything to buttress your case. For suggestions on the type of information to communicate, see "Communicating what matters most" below.

2. *Are directors held accountable?* Accountability for communicating the messages could range from formal measurements and incentives documented on performance plans to informal questioning – did you deliver those messages to your teams? – by the MD. Measures and incentives loudly convey what's important. If team communication isn't measured and rewarded, it's unrealistic to expect directors to give it high priority.

3. *Is it easy to deliver the messages?* I find it helpful to organize key messages in terms of themes, summary statements and supporting facts. For example, Figure 1 below shows how XYZ company organizes a key message to job candidates. Notice how the message is summarized in one sentence and supported by compelling facts, which boost credibility. You might try organizing the MD's key messages in a similar fashion. I would limit to three the total number of messages and ask directors to convey them in their own words.

Figure 1. A guide to organizing key messages

Theme
Professional Development

Summary Statement
XYZ can help you grow professionally and develop in-demand skills.

Supporting Facts
XYZ routinely makes "best employer" lists for professional development.

Every employee receives a minimum of 100 hours of training each year.

Our employees use cutting-edge technology, tackling some of the toughest challenges in our industry.

Our operations span four continents and employees frequently take on cross-border assignments.

Communicating what matters most

For guidance on what the MD communicates to the department, here's a model you can use. First, think about the external environment in which your company operates. What's creating expansion opportunities? What could derail your business? What are your competitors up to? What do your customers expect?

Then, in light of these external issues, consider what your company is doing to seize opportunities, protect itself from threats and exploit its natural advantages. In other words, what's your business strategy? This could entail describing your target customers, brand promises, product or service offerings, competitive positioning, etc.

Lastly, determine how your department needs to operate internally in order to achieve the business strategy. What's expected of people? How will the department use technology? What communication practices will be employed? What are its HR practices?

'How will we know they are doing it?'

Finally, with respect to the issue of knowing whether the directors are indeed communicating the MD's messages, I would suggest the following three approaches:

1. **Ask the directors** how often they communicate the messages. If they confess to not communicating the messages frequently, ask them why. This also presents a good opportunity to gather their feedback on the messages in general and how to make them more effective.
2. **Speak with groups of employees**. Conduct listening sessions to gather employees' thoughts on – and understanding of – the company's strategic direction. Also ask about employees' needs for information and ideas on how the department can operate more effectively.
3. **Survey the entire department** to test for understanding of key business issues that should have been communicated. In your surveys, don't ask employees whether they understand something; give them actual quiz-type questions. To lessen the awkwardness of this, you might position the survey as a test of communication effectiveness, not of employees' knowledge.

Once your directors have armed their teams with the type of information described above – and you have refined the communication approach through ongoing feedback – people should feel well informed about the issues facing your department and the company as a whole. This will not only increase people's business literacy, but also help them connect their individual efforts to the department's broader objectives. It's hard to argue that knowledge like that doesn't add value.