

Communicating Strategically: A Perspective and Case Study about Creating Comfort with Uncertainty

Phillip G. Clampitt
Information Sciences
University of Wisconsin - Green Bay
TH 331
Green Bay, WI 54311
920.465.2324

Bob DeKoch
Boldt Construction Company

Tom Cashman
Appleton Papers

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Executive Overview

Executives can communicate about anything but they can not communicate about everything. Consequently, either explicitly or implicitly, they make communicative choices, which in turn becomes the organization's communication strategy. These choices are all the more important in times of great organizational uncertainty wrought by increased global competition, quicker cycle times and the ever-changing marketplace. What are the communication strategies available to executives? How should they be made? And which increase organizational effectiveness? These are the core questions discussed in this article. We conclude with a case study demonstrating the benefits of systematically developing a communication strategy to address organizational uncertainty.

Talk is not nearly as cheap as some people assume. After all, executives spend a great deal of time conducting meetings, giving speeches, responding to email and drafting reports. Executives usually have less time than money. And no executive would cavalierly spend financial capital, nor should they carelessly fritter away their communicative resources. Yet, many do. Why? Perhaps they do not realize the value of a comprehensive communication strategy. Executives face an array of pressing issues including how to retain quality employees¹, combat organizational cynicism², and create a dynamic, evolving workplace³. A proper communication strategy provides more than another tool to address issues of this sort; it creates the right environment. Executives, like those at FedEx, who can create passion in the workplace through consistent and energizing messages, tend to experience less employee turnover⁴. On the flip side, a communication strategy can provide a hedge against employee cynicism by ensuring that dissenting opinions about decisions, practices or policies are appropriately channeled. A well-developed communication strategy also cultivates the kind of environment more accepting of change and innovation⁵. 3M, for example, sows the seeds of innovation by routinely recording and telling stories about breakthrough products, processes, and ideas⁶.

Technologies like the Internet should also encourage executives to reconsider traditional top-down communication strategies. Employees can quickly and easily access information from sources both inside and outside the organization. These communication tools can profoundly impact workers' thoughts, motivations, and actions. Executives can not hope to control information the way they once did. Therefore, they need new strategies that can adjust to these dynamics. What strategic options are available? Which are most effective? We explore these issues in this article and conclude with a case study demonstrating the benefits of developing a communication strategy designed to address organizational uncertainty. In short, "talk" may well be the most important and difficult investment decision an executive makes.

What Is a Communication Strategy?

The word "strategy" has more frequently been coupled with the word "business" than with "communication". A long and intellectually stimulating history regarding business strategy has spawned both controversy and understanding.⁷ Our aim is not to revisit the debates but to glean the core insights that allow us to suggest a viable, though surely not the only, approach for developing organizations' internal communication strategy. For our purpose we broadly define strategy as the "macro-level choices and tradeoffs

executives⁸ make based on their organizational goals and judgments about others' reactions which serves as a basis for action." We elaborate on this notion below:

First, strategy involves a macro-level orientation that can be distinguished from tactical concerns. The word strategy is indirectly derived from the word "strategos" which denotes generalship. Generals are concerned with the big picture. Typically strategy occurs at higher organizational and abstraction levels than tactical issues. Strategy is less easily changed than tactics. There are usually many different tactics that could be used to implement a strategy. Southwest Airline's strategy to "serve price and convenience sensitive travelers" is supported by a host of tactics including using secondary airports, flying relatively short distances, and using standard aircraft for the entire fleet.⁹ Presumably some of those tactics could be modified or some added and the strategy would remain intact.

Likewise, a strategic communication decision to "foster interdepartmental communication" can be accomplished by various methods such as job rotation and using cross-functional teams¹⁰. Confusion between communication strategies and tactics can be problematic because focusing on tactical perfection does not guarantee strategic success. An effective job rotation program may not result in better interdepartmental communication. Like all tactics, there is an upside and downside. While job rotation can help a few employees understand different departmental dynamics, the tactic may not provide the timely information necessary to alleviate conflicts between divisions.

To be fair, the distinction between strategy and tactics is not always clear and often, they evolve in tandem. Nevertheless, the distinction helps structure an executive's thinking. Often when executives are questioned about their communication strategy they say something like, "we have a monthly newsletter and I hold quarterly meetings with employees". This is like an executive saying to a potential investor that our new product is our strategy. A savvy investor wants to know about the target market, the company's underlying objectives, and how the company is positioned. In short, a communication strategy involves something more than selecting channels.

Second, strategy involves implicit or explicit choices resulting in tradeoffs. An organization makes choices about which markets to pursue and which opportunities to ignore. Sometimes this is a thoughtful and explicit choice like those who use a specific strategic planning process. At other times, it is more emergent like those used by businesses focused on experimentation.

Likewise, communicators explicitly or implicitly choose what to talk about, and what to ignore. The executives' agenda could include virtually anything from internal issues like sexual harassment and team building to external ones like market share or meeting customer expectations. How the agenda is shaped can have a profound impact on the organization. For instance, an executive for a dairy plant was advised that it was important for employees to "express their concerns", no matter how trivial or misguided they may be. On the surface "listening to employee concerns" may appear to be a fine idea. Unfortunately in this company it turned out to be a counterproductive practice. It led to a culture of complaint in which everyone was free to gripe but no one did anything to address the problems. There was no forum or mechanism for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate concerns. The manager made an inappropriate tradeoff in favor of allowing employees to voice their concerns instead of discussing solutions. Consequently, everyone was dissatisfied, important issues were overlooked, and the plant underperformed. Eventually the plant manager was replaced by one who insisted that all concerns be accompanied with ideas for resolution. This drastically cut down on the griping while improving productivity.

Managing the agenda or "*what* executives talk about" is not the only critical choice. The traditional questions of "who-what-when-where-why and how" are a reasonably good starting point for developing a communication strategy:

- ? With *whom* will executives communicate?
- ? *How* will employees and executives communicate?
- ? *When* will employees and executives communicate?
- ? *Where* will employees and executives communicate?

These are not trivial decisions for they will shape the communication environment of executives. Unfortunately, many of these issues are rarely discussed explicitly, much less with an eye to the implicit tradeoffs.

The age-old efficiency/effectiveness and short-term/long-term dilemmas often lie at the root of these tradeoffs. It may be more efficient to send email to all employees outlining a major change but this is not an effective way to create employee "buy-in". Face-to-face communication is a more persuasive channel because it provides a dynamic and effective way for dealing with employee objections. However, a rich media like face-to-face communication costs the organization more in terms of time and energy than

lean media like email¹¹. Thus, executives should ask a fundamental strategic question, "which issues are worth discussing using this expensive channel?"

To take a slightly different tact, consider the following tension points:

- ? **"Who" versus "What"**. Employees routinely report that they prefer to receive information from their immediate supervisor. Surveys also show that employees are most curious about "organizational plans for the future".¹² Unfortunately, supervisors are often in the worst possible position to a) know about future plans, b) understand the rationale for the plans, and c) advocate the plans. There are often legitimate legal and organizational reasons why executives can not adequately inform first-line supervisors about impending plans. Consequently, a strategic question involves who is empowered to talk about what?
- ? **"When" versus "How"**. One executive insisted that *all* the details of minor organizational policies be completed before unveiling them to employees in an all-company meeting, regardless of the number of rumors circulating. He never realized that speed is sometimes more important than complete two-way communication with employees. In this case, the efficiency of email or voice-mail would have been more effective in taming the grapevine. Thus, executives need to ask a fundamental question: when is speed more important than comprehensiveness?
- ? **"Why" versus "what"**. One executive's primary forum for communicating was a quarterly meeting with employees about the company's future plans. He provided appropriate information about how the business was doing and the future outlook. Employees even complimented him on his ability to explain what was "going on". Strangely, many employees were vaguely mistrustful of him. Fellow executives had precisely the opposite impression, which made the situation even more puzzling. The key insight came when we analyzed his communications to employees. We discovered that he never discussed his underlying motives; he only communicated about "what" and not "why". Equipped with this insight, he slightly altered his communication style and employee apprehensions slowly disappeared. Thus, a critical question is how to properly balance "why" and "what" messages.

There are, of course, many other tension points to address. But the fundamental strategic issue question persists: How do executives make the appropriate tradeoffs? To this issue we now turn.

Third, strategy involves goal setting. Virtually all organizations have stated objectives. But determining those objectives is not a simple task. Consider the difficulty in specifying the goals of U.S. foreign policy. Former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, remarked:

The problem of most previous periods was that purpose outran knowledge. The challenge of our period is the opposite: knowledge is far outrunning purposes.

The task for the United States therefore is not only to reconcile its power and its morality but to temper its faith with wisdom.¹³

Similar difficulties plague executives seeking to determine the objectives of communication systems. Many don't think about it explicitly. Others tend to settle for vagaries such as "keeping everyone informed". An objective of this ilk invites a host of other questions: "Informed about what?", "Informed in how much detail?", "Informed in what way?", "Informed how often?", etc. Even more vexing issues can be raised: "How will we know when employees have been properly informed?", "Is it really possible to keep everyone informed about everything?", and "Is it even desirable?" As Kissinger points out, information or knowledge is not always the answer; it may, in fact, be the problem.

The central question executives need to ask is, "why should we communicate?" Inevitably, this leads to setting communication priorities. Unfortunately, most discussions of communication never reach this level and implicit or ill-conceived objectives underpin the strategy.

Fourth, strategy involves anticipating others' reactions. The great military strategist, Edward Luttwak observed:

In the ebb and flow of reciprocal development, the same device could be highly effective, totally useless, and positively dangerous within a matter of months, as in the case of rearward-looking radars fitted on British bombers to warn of approaching fighters, which were first lifesavers, then jammed, and soon became a deadly danger to those who used them ...¹⁴

In the realm of military as well as business strategy, anticipating the cascade of responses proves critical. For instance, when a software company decides to develop a new product,

it should clearly consider how Microsoft would respond. Even when an opportunity currently exists, the crucial issue revolves around how competitors are likely to respond.

Likewise, anticipating the probable responses of employees to communicative initiatives is central to the development of a viable strategy. The dance between the initiative and the response and then the subsequent adjustments creates the dialogue that determines the success of the strategy. Why? Because the messages sent influence those received. If, for example, the message sent to employees is that "mistakes will not be tolerated", then employees will often make efforts not only to avoid mistakes but also not tell anyone that mistakes have been made. That dance differs greatly from one based on a theme of "learning to avoid mistakes". This is perhaps a subtle difference but one that can have profound consequences.

Fifth, strategy naturally serves as the basis for action. Strategic planning is rarely done solely as an intellectual activity. Rather the exercise is used to focus decision-making, shape personnel policies, motivate employees and guide a host of other activities.

Likewise, communication strategy provides the basis for structuring, executing, and evaluating communication practices. All the traditional communication forums – newsletters, quarterly meetings, all company mailings etc. – naturally flow from the strategy. Perhaps this explains why most employee newsletters are littered with the dreadful three B's (birthday, bowling scores, and baby announcements). This becomes the debris left from superficial discussions regarding communication strategy. If no one asks about the strategic purpose of a newsletter, it should be no surprise that it turns into a monthly version of a high school yearbook. Yet, clarity of purpose can transform the communication system while significantly improving organizational performance.

What Makes a Communication Strategy Effective?

Communication strategies can be developed either deliberately or by happenstance. By chance, a few organizations stumble on strategies that appear to work. But generally, that is not the case. Thoughtful analysis of executives' communication needs and employees' concerns can help an organization make the appropriate choices and tradeoffs which result in an effective strategy designed to incite meaningful actions. We hinted at the attributes of an effective strategy in the previous section and now we make those more explicit.

First, an effective strategy links to organizational goals. There is no "one size fits all" communication strategy because organizations have very different objectives. Consider, for example, an Internet-based organization. The industry and its protocols are changing so rapidly that a communication strategy designed to provide employees with carefully thought out and fully developed plans would quickly break down. Therefore, the communication strategy should focus on speed. When the industry matures, companies will need to develop different approaches. In fact, researchers have linked effective communication strategies to productivity gains, efficiency improvements, cost reductions, improved morale, and decreased turnover.¹⁵ In short, aligned strategies tend to enhance organizational performance.

On the other hand, misaligned strategies can hinder organizational performance. For instance, in one medical clinic, the executive board of physicians determined that one of their key business objectives was to increase employee accountability. Unfortunately, they never developed a supportive communication strategy. In fact, their de facto strategy was to blame the employee nearest to them at the time they discovered any problem. Their actions (or inaction), therefore, ran counter to their objectives. The result was that employees were simultaneously held accountable for everything while not being responsible for anything in particular. Inevitably this led to low morale, high turnover, disorganization, and ultimately, patient frustration. Eventually the physicians were convinced to "try out" a strategic communication plan, which started with dialogue about job responsibilities. They were amazed at the results. The physicians finally knew *who* to talk to about *what*. And, of course, this increased employee accountability.

Finally consider one nonprofit business development organization that was quite proud of its newsletter aimed at local businesses. In fact, the newsletter received several design awards. However, when the director was asked about how the newsletter was linked to the organization's goals, she honestly admitted that she "didn't have a clue." The various awards misdirected attention from the underlying strategic purpose. In sum, communication strategies not linked to underlying organizational goals are as effective as an aesthetically pleasing advertising campaign that fails to generate business.

Second, an effective strategy legitimizes certain issues and de-legitimizes others. "Don't go there" is a popular phrase with teenagers these days. While savvy executives may not use that lingo, they should be comfortable with the underlying sentiment. A successful communication strategy is as much about what is *not* said as it is about what *is*

said. By setting the agenda executives shape the playing field. In one case, we quite literally determined what was "in bounds" and "out of bounds". The culture of complaint become so debilitating in the dairy plant described previously that they drew a diagram of what they should talk about and what they should not talk about (See Figure 1). The executives introduced the diagram, discussed why it was needed, and how it was to be used in an all-employee meeting. Then the diagram was posted in every supervisor's office and meeting room. "Are we talking in the circle?" became the plant mantra for several months. Gradually the culture of complaint was transformed into a culture of confronting core concerns. Companies that promote their core values or competencies are essentially doing the same thing. The values direct attention away from presumably irrelevant matters and shift attention to core issues.

Third, an effective strategy shapes organizational memory. There are many factors that influence the interpretation of events but few are more important than memory. Brain researchers tell us that memory serves as a template that allows us to discern differences and similarities between events. Consider, for example, how high altitude climbing often degrades a mountaineer's memory. One climber returning from the summit of Mount Everest was prepared to leap across a seven foot crevasse when he couldn't locate a ladder on the traditional path, even though the ladder was only moved 15 feet from the original location.¹⁶ Normally functioning hikers would have no problem discerning the similarity between the two locations. Clearly, memory has a major impact on how we react; it can cause us to fall over the precipice or scale the heights.

The aim of the communication strategy, therefore, is to create the proper kinds of memories. Consider the following situation. A development team spent an enormous amount of time and energy launching a new product line. They gave up weekends and vacation time to meet their quality standards and deadlines. Unfortunately, the product line was not received well in the marketplace. The crucial issue was how this event would be remembered. Employees invested their minds and hearts in the project and it failed. But why? Unfortunately, most employees remembered this as the time that senior management did not support them, complaining that, "if only they would have invested a few more dollars in the marketing effort, this product would have succeeded." Consequently, they were discouraged and less inclined to devote much energy to future projects. There was an alternative. Senior management could have created a different

memory - one based on the need to learn more about the marketplace before launching a product line. Thus, organizational memory creates an inertia that can facilitate innovation or kill it.

The communication strategy has a great deal to do with how events will be remembered, which in turn shapes employee responses. There is a lot of discussion these days about the “learning organization” but it is important to note that employees often learn the wrong lessons as well as the right ones. Executives have a responsibility to create the right memories.

Fourth, an effective strategy makes sense of the confusing and ambiguous. One of the by-products of the so called “information age” is that employees often receive a vast array of information that is confusing, contradictory, and ambiguous. Karl Weick perceptively comments on this fact of corporate life:

The problem is that there are too many meanings, not too few. The problem faced by the sensemaker is one of equivocality, not one of uncertainty. The problem is confusion, not ignorance. I emphasize this because those investigators who favor the metaphor of information processing often view sensemaking, as they do most other problems, as a setting where people need more information. That is not what people need when they are overwhelmed by equivocality.¹⁷

Employees use a variety of methods to cope with this situation. Some are healthy, such as discussions with other employees. Others are not, such as ignoring potentially useful information. Weick's advice:

One message for practitioners is that what is real is more up for grabs than they realize, which means their presumptions can have a major influence over how others describe reality. Furthermore, managers need to author, examine, and critique realities thought to be in place. They cannot take those realities for granted or assume they are obvious to anyone else.¹⁸

Acting on his counsel is a daunting challenge; similar to simultaneously assuming the role of a mind reader, detective, analyst, pundit, fortuneteller, and dramatist.

Consider the situation of the maintenance employee who asked an executive during a quarterly meeting about the meaning of "downtime". His supervisor always pressured him to finish repair jobs in the allotted downtime slot for a piece of industrial machinery - even if he felt the job required an extra hour of work to "do the job right". He was perplexed and frankly angry over the fact that the same machine could be shut down for

production reasons a couple of days later. He inquired, "what's the difference between an extra hour of downtime on Monday when you shut the entire machine down on Thursday for two days?" The executive responded, "Not running a machine during scheduled production time costs the company about \$500/hour because we pay a "penalty" for not meeting customer deadlines. When we choose not to run a machine several days later, it only costs us about \$150/hour." The employee's confusion was certainly understandable, as was the executive's response. In essence there were two kinds of downtime, not one, as most people would reasonably assume. Confusion of this sort occurs all the time. An effective strategy allows employees to ask these kinds of questions and get some sensible answer - even if they don't agree with the response. The alternative is that employees, like this one, become further confused and disenfranchised.

Fifth, an effective strategy provides a proper point of identity. The employee who identifies with a particular job like "buggy whip maker" differs considerably from a "leather craftsman" who happens to make buggy whips. Who will more quickly adjust to changes in the marketplace? The specificity of the "buggy whip maker's" point of identity restricts his horizons as well as his employer's. This is why thoughtful organizations pay close attention to the language they use in everyday discourse. Xerox, for instance, defines itself as the "document company" which is quite different from the "photocopy company". Presumably a document company can build the machinery to make photocopies, but it is not conceptually restricted to do so. Increasing the variety, complexity and subtlety of the language changes the way employee think about what they do¹⁹. Names have consequences.

Consider those special organizations that are immersed in a quality culture that drives the company toward customer satisfaction. Walking around companies like Southwest Airlines, Milliken & Co., and Wainwright Industries, you see it everywhere; on posters, work shirts, letterhead, and employee license plates. This is not merely some kind of political campaign slogan but a deeply ingrained way of life. Departments measure their performance against quality standards that are linked to compensation and bonuses. The quality culture provides a unique point of identity and commonality for all employees. It is what distinguishes these companies from the others. And it works. Consider the hourly employee who was arguing with a midlevel manager about how to pack a semi-trailer with a paper product. The hourly worker invoked the company's customer and quality process: "This is the way the customer wants us to pack it. I thought we believed

in focusing on the customer." Result: the trailer was loaded the way the customer wanted. In many companies the hourly worker would quickly acquiesce to those in authority. Thus, the proper identity provides employees with an unusual power that perhaps meets some of their most basic human needs. It also, of course, provides the organization with a unique method for resolving conflicts that are not based solely on organizational status.

Sixth, an effective strategy evolves. As an organization's goals and employees change, so must the communication strategy. For years Merrill Lynch prided itself on fostering relationships with customers through well-trained full service brokers. Only recently did they decide to break from this tradition and offer discount brokerage via the Internet. This was, no doubt, a painful change in communication and business strategy but a necessary one in light of the changing expectations of customers. The old assumptions were no longer valid.

Reassessing assumptions is one source of renewal. Strategies can also evolve by carefully evaluating feedback about the various communication practices, initiatives and programs. A company, for example, may have the right message but use the wrong channel to communicate it. Regrettably, many executives choose to ignore the responses to their communication strategies and tactics. The nastiest gremlin to exorcise is denial. If executives can do that they will have the prescience of a prophet.

Careful observers will note that the first three attributes are mainly concerned with the underlying needs of a successful organization. Creating focus, setting priorities, and shaping proper memories are classic notions related to organizational effectiveness. The second set of attributes focuses more on the underlying needs of employees. Humans are sense-making creatures; we need to reduce disorder, uncertainty, and confusion in order to properly function. Likewise we need to identify with others or ideas that motivate us. And finally, we all need to mature and evolve. How well an organization meets its own needs and those of its employees is intimately linked to the communication strategy.

What Communication Strategies Do Executives Use?

Unfortunately, few organizations have communication strategies with the attributes previously described. Often times an organization's strategy simply emerges from existing practices with little hard thinking about the process or consequences.

After assessing numerous communication systems and reviewing relevant literature, we discovered the following typical strategies²⁰:

- ? **Spray & Pray.** This strategy is based on the idea that management should spray or shower employees with all kinds of information. Executives pray or hope that employees will be able to sort out the significant from insignificant. The motives seem admirable because managers often assume that more information equals better communication and decision-making. Simple, yes. Effective, rarely. Consider one CEO who was perplexed by a communication assessment that suggested that employees were confused about the direction of the organization. He told us that he sent out detailed email messages about "what's happening" on a weekly basis. But most employees were ill-equipped to discern the differences between salient messages and those less so. Many complained that even if they knew *what* was "happening", they did not have clue about *why* decisions were made. Some employees only attended to information that supported their own personal agenda, while others were overwhelmed by the amount of information. In short, the CEO's implicit prayers were rarely answered.
- ? **Tell & Sell -** This strategy provides more focus than Spray & Pray. Managers aim to communicate a more limited set of messages that they believe address core organizational issues. First, they tell employees about the key issues. Second, they sell employees on the wisdom of their approach. The tell-tale sign: executives who spend the majority of their time planning sophisticated presentations with all the "bells and whistles", perhaps even including cups and tee-shirts promoting organizational initiatives. Consequently they devote little energy to thinking about how to foster meaningful dialogue with employees about concerns related to their proposals. These executives often assume that employees are passive information receivers and feedback is rarely necessary. They may also believe that they are in the position to know all the key organizational issues. These assumptions are dubious at best. Employee skepticism, if not cynicism, can be the long-term consequence because they tire of yet another "program of the month".
- ? **Underscore & Explore.** Executives using this approach *underscore* several core messages and then *explore* employee reactions. They focus on those fundamental issues most clearly linked to organizational success, while allowing employees the creative freedom to explore the implications of those ideas in a disciplined way. Executives assume that communication is not complete until they know how employees react to the core ideas. Therefore, they are concerned not only with

developing a few core messages but also with listening attentively for potential misunderstandings and unrecognized obstacles. The case study at the end of the paper provides a detailed example of how one company implemented this strategy.

- ? **Identify & Reply.** This strategy marks a departure from the first three because it focuses on employee concerns. It stresses the importance of making sense out of the often-confusing organizational environment. However, this is fundamentally a defensive posture in which executives *identify* key employee concerns and then *reply* to those issues. Employees set the agenda, while executives respond to rumors, innuendoes, and leaks. The strategy emphasizes the importance of listening to employees. The assumption is that employees are in the best position to know the critical issues when, in fact, they may not know enough to even ask the right questions. In the worst case, the strategy evolves into an “I bitch, you fix” conversation between employees and executives.
- ? **Withhold & Uphold.** In effect, Ken Starr used this strategy when communicating with the press during the investigation of President Clinton. "I'll tell them when they need to know" is the guiding maxim behind this strategy. Executives *withhold* information until necessary and when confronted by rumors, they *uphold* the party line. Secrecy and control are often the implicit values of those who embrace this strategy. Often executives adopting this strategy assume that information is power and they don't want to share it with anyone. Others assume that employees are not sophisticated enough to grasp the big picture. Consider, for example, retired General Chuck Horner's astonishingly blunt remarks about the leadership problems during the Vietnam War:

I didn't hate them because they were dumb, I didn't hate them because they had spilled our blood for nothing. I hated them because of their arrogance ... because they had convinced themselves that they actually knew what they were doing and that we were too minor to understand the "Big Picture."²¹

Unfortunately bitterness of this sort, if perhaps less vehement, infects most organizations adopting this strategy. Inevitably, when executives adopt this strategy the rumor mill works overtime, while productivity grinds down.

Executives, no doubt, use other strategies or perhaps use hybrids of these approaches. But note the underlying tendencies. On one extreme, employees receive all the information

they could possibly desire, while at the other, they are provided little or no communication. Strategies at the extremes have a similar quality: employees have difficulty framing and making sense out of organizational events. Discovering salient information, focusing on core issues and creating the proper memories, are left to employees' personal whims.

We use a crescent-shaped continuum to visually highlight those similarities (See Illustration 2). The strategies toward the middle tend to offer employees more guidance by prioritizing communications and providing relevant specifics. These strategies also tend to be the most sensitive to employee needs although they make different assumptions about the nature of those needs.

Table 1 presents an evaluation of these basic strategies based on the criteria we previously discussed. Executives might convincingly argue that any one of these strategies might be appropriate in a certain situation. During a war, generals (even General Horner) may be well advised to adopt an Identify & Reply or perhaps a Withhold & Uphold strategy. Small organizations operating under great time constraints might find that the Spray & Pray strategy works reasonably well. However, after carefully examining the impact of various approaches, we are convinced that those strategies at the ends of the continuum usually limit organizational performance. *As a general rule, we believe the Underscore & Explore strategy maximizes organizational potential by creatively synthesizing executives' initiatives and employee concerns.* It allows executives to shape the agenda as implied in the Tell & Sell strategy, while devoting time to employee concerns as suggested by the Identify & Reply strategy.

How Can Executives Develop an Effective Communication Strategy?

There are dozens of tools available for developing a strategic organizational plan but comparatively few for creating communication strategies. We divide the process into three overlapping phases: discover, create, and assess. We depict each phase in Figure 3 as a triangle to signal the relative breadth of the intellectual and intuitive challenge faced during the activities within each phase. For example, establishing the goals of the communication strategy is less daunting than discerning the core organizational issues worthy of being addressed. The overlapping triangle symbolizes how the results of each phase provide the starting point for another major thought-provoking endeavor. The communication goals, for example, provide the core around which an innovative strategy can be designed. Finally, note that this entire activity takes place in the ever-changing

internal and external environment, which may impact the process in unpredictable ways at any time.

Phase 1: Discover

The basic objective in phase one is to *discover* the fundamental themes and translate that insight into some fairly specific goals. Three activities are necessary in order to accomplish this feat: study the organization, discern the critical issues, and establish the appropriate goals.

Study the Organization

Without a fairly thorough understanding of the organization, the various constituencies, and the communication system, it would be exceedingly difficult to develop a viable strategy. When studying something as complex as an organization it is difficult to precisely identify what may eventually prove relevant. Therefore communication strategists need to cast a big net to fully understand the goals of executives, the aspirations of employees, the challenges faced by the organization, and the nuances of the existing communication system. The implicit and explicit knowledge gained in this research expedition provides the basis for a sound communication strategy.

Discern the Critical Themes

Discerning the underlying themes is the most important and difficult task in the entire process. Important because it is the only way in which executives can significantly improve the odds that the communication strategy succeeds and the organization moves forward. Difficult because there are so many competing interests. For instance, it is hard for many executives to choose the one or two most important values to pursue over the course of year. The typical refrain is, "they are all important", but that is merely a way to avoid making difficult choices. On another level, employee-driven issues often compete with executive-driven initiatives. For instance, a senior administrator's desire to "develop greater employee accountability" is not necessarily congruent with the professorate's desire for academic freedom.

Discerning is also difficult because it involves identifying the most important latent patterns that hinder organizational performance. It is, for example, relatively easy to determine that employees are dissatisfied and executives frustrated. But determining how these two issues are fundamentally related is a much more vexing task. Likewise, identifying all the organizational issues that need to be addressed is fairly straightforward but finding the underlying connection and determining what to do first is the tough part.

The most successful strategies emerge at the nexus of organizational, executive and employee orientations. A strategy driven only by organizational necessity is unlikely to succeed. Consider the relatively spotty success efforts of those organizations that downsize. A strategy driven only by executive desires is unlikely to be sustainable. *Fortune* estimates that 70% of the CEOs who fail, do so because of poor execution: initiatives are not completed and commitments are not kept. As a result, employees are unsupportive.²² A strategy driven only by an employee orientation is unlikely to be disciplined enough to remain competitive. The sad state of many public schools demonstrates the perils of ignoring the needs of society. Finding that sweet middle spot is most likely to create enough focus, motivation, and relevancy for the organization to excel.

Establish the Goals

Discerning the core issues for organizational success provides the necessary background for establishing specific communication goals. Typically the goals revolve around "pushing" certain vital messages, while allowing employees to "pull" other related messages and information. For instance, 20% of the communication goals for one company involved pushing or pulling a "cost reduction" message:

- ? Focus employee thinking on the personal implications of "reducing costs" (push).
- ? Provide recognition of employees who are actually "reducing costs" (push).
- ? Make available timely information about the status of "cost reduction" efforts (pull).

The central question: If the communication strategy succeeds, what should happen in the organization? Presumably when the communication goals are achieved, then the organization's, executives', and employees' objectives have been achieved.

Phase 2: Create

The communication strategy is built around the strategic goals established in phase one. There are two essential activities at this point; a) developing the specific messages, protocols, tools, and plans needed to achieve the communicative goals, and b) implementing the strategy.

Develop the Strategy

As all effective strategists learn, anticipating other's reactions is the key to success. For example, unless the company previously discussed demonstrated how "cost cutting" benefited union employees, it would not be very motivating. In fact, the company decided to link "cost cutting" and "long-term viability" to produce the core message. While cost

cutting was both an organizational imperative and an executive initiative, the “long-term viability” issue was crafted to link to employee needs for job security. They *pushed* this core message in a variety of ways including producing a short video of employee-driven cost cutting projects that improved the company's long-term viability. In addition, an Intranet web site was planned which enabled employees to *pull* information on the company's cost reduction efforts. For each of these initiatives the company specified the goal, target audience, and rationale.

One of the problems at this stage is that most organizations already have a communication system in place that may or may not be appropriate. In fact, there is a strong temptation to merely adapt existing tools and hope for the best. One organization relied almost exclusively on written communication to "inform and persuade the troops". The senior executives were continually frustrated by the lack of employee "buy-in" despite the time they devoted to honing their messages. New brochures, more frequent memos, and even a new email system did not seem to do the trick. The executives, of course, never thought systematically about their communication efforts in the way we described. Years later after the team was "replaced", a new senior executive realized the essence of the problem - a lack of face-to-face communication driven by explicit goals. Unfortunately, his predecessor had left in place a fairly elaborate communication infrastructure built around written communication. Re-orienting the communication system involved considerable effort because the existing staff was ill-equipped for the new demands.

Implement the Strategy

A successful implementation is based on sound tactics and execution. The decision to create the cost-cutting video may be strategically sound, but if it is not well produced and seen by enough employees, it will fail at the tactical and execution levels. Fortunately there is a wealth of resources available to executives on how to successfully create videos, deliver speeches, plan meetings, and create compelling web sites. In fact, most basic communication skills training focuses on effective tactics.

Phase 3: Assess

No strategy, thoughtfully designed or not, is perfect. That is why the final assessment stage is so critical; it provides the necessary corrective feedback to improve both the strategy and tactics. Employee surveys, focus groups and observations are all useful tools. Ultimately we want to know if the communication objectives are being reached.

For instance, are employees thinking about how they can cut costs? We also want to evaluate the responses to the core messages and the effectiveness of communication systems and vehicles. Skilled assessors learn to distinguish between mere awareness, motivation, and action. Awareness is often the starting point and may be, in fact, a preliminary goal but the ultimate test for most communication strategies is to shape actions.

The assessment phase can contribute much needed communicative discipline because it helps ensure that the central messages impact the organization in the desired way. Two major temptations plague the executive after implementation. First, executives, having restless dispositions, tire of repeating the core messages and teaching employees about the implications of the ideas. Executives routinely underestimate how long it takes to effectively communicate. Proper assessment processes should demonstrate how long it really takes to have an impact on employee thinking and behavior. Second, executives may be tempted to overload the system with too much information or too many core messages resulting in confusion and lack of focus. An assessment procedure, like a focus group, could uncover the employees' quandaries.

Assessment processes also provide an effective way to help the organization assimilate and stabilize the strategy. Implementing a vigorous communication strategy is like initiating any other major organizational change effort. Executives should expect similar problems, like employee resistance. Deciding, for example, to routinely discuss the implications of the company financial results with all employees may undermine some manager's perceived power base. Likewise, some employees will not immediately be convinced of the need for the change. These, aptly named, "late adopters" often understand the importance of a well-developed communication strategy once the data reveals less grapevine activity, greater employee focus, and progress on organizational goals. In short, assessment processes suggest ways to improve the strategy and tactics, while helping organizations institutionalize a more effective underlying communicative system.

We have described this process in a fairly linear fashion but it is actually far more dynamic. Core messages are often shaped by the existing constraints on the communication system. If employees are geographically dispersed, then it may prove difficult to foster a rich dialogue about a new organizational initiative. The message may

have to be modified to fit that constraint. For instance, effective political campaigns are usually based on relatively simple "sound bites" designed to garner votes, not necessarily understanding. To some extent, this is just a natural result of the heavy dependence on television as a tool to reach the masses. If print were the media of choice, it would no doubt shape a different kind of message. Thus, the dynamic interplay between channels and messages, senders and receivers, and ultimately between reality and the ideal, have a profound impact on the final strategy.

Case Study

There was a time when employee communications could be carefully and fully planned. Today, care has given way to speed and planning to uncertainty. Unfortunately, the old ways of communicating are deeply ingrained not only in most organizations' communication systems but also in the expectations of employees. Consequently, any attempt to develop a communication strategy based on speed and uncertainty is fraught with resistance on a variety of levels. The following case illustrates the magnitude of the challenge.

Background

This manufacturing organization has a rich history of great financial success and world-class customer service and products. The strategy was developed for one of the unionized plants that employed approximately 1000 employees including 200 engineers, support staff, and managers. The communication system was based on the following conventional vehicles: Quarterly plant-wide meetings with plant manager, bi-monthly newsletter filled with the traditional 3 B's, and periodic all-plant emails from senior executives.

Discover Phase

Like most companies, they approached communication from a tactical rather than strategic level. They knew it was important to "get the word out" but were fairly undisciplined in identifying core messages. So they bombarded employees with news about productivity gains, financial results, training programs and the like. Unknowingly they used the Spray & Pray strategy.

However, when it came to issues regarding the future like layoffs or crewing changes, they were unusually reticent. In fact, for most part they were responsive rather than proactive. In this one particular area, they adopted the Withhold & Uphold strategy. If they felt they could keep it secret, they would. And there were a number of seemingly

good reasons for doing so. Executives had, for instance, been "burned" when they talked about possibilities. Some employees transformed talk of possibilities into promises about the future. Then employees felt they were deceived when the "promises" were not kept. After numerous instances like this, many executives kept a stony silence about future events until the last possible moment. For example, a major reengineering of a machine was only announced a week before it was to take place. Employees were reduced to reading the proverbial tea leaves and relying on an unusually robust rumor mill. The formal communication system exacerbated the problems for several reasons. The messages tended to be overly formalistic which did not invite a lot of useful feedback. The timing was often poor because it was driven by the quarterly meeting schedule. Hence, there were fairly long segments of time in which there was a formal information vacuum that was filled, of course, by various rumors.

Something had to change. Simultaneously maintaining the Spray & Pray and Withhold & Uphold strategies was untenable for a company committed to continuous improvement. Providing all the information employees could possibly want while avoiding the issues (e.g. future plans) they cared about most bred discontent and mistrust. In fact, the prevailing opinion was that management was either evil for withholding information, stupid because they didn't know what was happening, or helpless since they never reacted until the last minute. We dubbed this phenomenon the "terrible triad."

Yet, executives had a ready reply to those who complained about communication: "we provide more information about finances, productivity, etc., than any other company in the world." While the claim was fundamentally true, it was essentially a way to avoid the underlying conundrum. Management felt it could not trust employees to responsibly deal with information of a speculative nature, while employees believed they could not trust management to provide them with reliable information. Both were right and both missed the bigger picture of how these beliefs were mutually reinforcing to create a toxic climate.

Once this fundamental destructive cycle was identified, we decided on a new approach based on the Underscore & Explore strategy. A select group of executives had five critical insights. First, executives had to determine a central theme or message that was linked to key plant goals. It was no longer going to "spray" information and "pray" that employees would understand the critical issues. Second, the theme had to be "pushed" for an extended period of time through multiple channels. Third, employee

expectations about the nature of communication had to change. Fourth, all members of the management team, not just the executive team, had to play a significant role in the communication process. Fifth, the existing communication system needed to be modified in ways to achieve these objectives.

Create Phase

Formulating a core message was fairly straightforward. We wanted to directly attack the "terrible triad" that management was stupid, helpless or evil. Management did not always know exactly what was going to happen but they had some fairly good ideas; they simply weren't sharing them out of the fear of being misunderstood. Consequently, they were not helpless. Evil was more difficult to attack since it dealt with motives. Our hope was that by addressing the first two issues, we could change the perceptions of the few who held this belief. During numerous meetings the core issue of uncertainty kept surfacing. Once employees came to believe that, unlike the past, the marketplace was rapidly changing, they would understand why crewing levels and orders were constantly in flux. Of course, that meant that executives would have to admit that there were many things they simply did not know until events dictated a change in direction. We did give some thought to pushing the message of flexibility because that is, in fact, the appropriate response to an uncertain environment. But after thoughtful discussion we decided that fundamentally, both management and employees, needed to do a better job of embracing uncertainty.

This theme was aimed at changing the fundamental beliefs of many employees. Therefore, we decided to push this theme for at least a year and then make an assessment of the effectiveness of the campaign. All the previous information about financial results, productivity gains, and the like would be available or could be "pulled" by employees but it would be presented in such a way to push the "embrace uncertainty" message. In other words, management would interpret information in light of the core theme. For instance, instead of merely providing information about the number of production runs, we would discuss what that information means, as well. Thus, an increase in the number of products run indicates that employees on that machine are learning to "embrace uncertainty". Why? Because it indicates that they have the ability to work in an ever-changing environment.

So much for the "underscore" part of the strategy; the "explore" idea was a little trickier. Our aim was to quickly discover and respond to employee concerns,

misconceptions, and points of resistance. The slowness of the existing system had two deleterious impacts. First, it augmented the influence of the rumor mill. Second it created expectations that when formal communications actually did occur, they would be complete, thorough and accurate. In a fluid environment, precisely the opposite was true. So we wanted to substitute speed for completeness and thoroughness. Accuracy would emerge over time like a continuously updated weather map. The closer we got to D-day, the more accurate the prediction.

Therefore we created two key communication channels designed to improve timeliness and explore employee perceptions: a bi-weekly Pulse Report and Supervisor Briefings. The Pulse Report was designed to quickly ascertain employee concerns. We divided the 1000 employees into 12 randomly selected groups. Approximately every two weeks one of the groups was asked to confidentially respond via email to 10 close-ended survey questions. They were also asked the following open-ended questions: a) What is your most important job-related concern?, and b) If you could ask the plant manager one question, what would it be? The confidentiality of respondents was maintained by using a consulting firm to compile and summarize the results in a formal Pulse Report issued every other week. The report was distributed to all managers and used as a basis for discussions in their departmental meetings.

Responses to the concerns were communicated in three ways. First, the Plant Manager selected two key issues that emerged from the Pulse Report and responded to them in a brief email to all employees. Second, the Plant Manager responded to each of the "ask the plant manager" open-ended questions and emailed his responses to the participating group members. This may sound like a daunting task, but many of the questions were similar and the motivational benefits were enormous. Finally, the Pulse Report was used as a basis to construct a Supervisor Briefing Points memorandum, which suggested responses to two key issues that supervisors could discuss with their employees. Supervisors were briefed every two weeks about the Briefing Points memo. Every Briefing Point memo had three key sections: a) story/learning opportunity, b) what we know now, and c) what we don't know how. The aim of the story was to constantly link information to core values and goals. The purpose of the "What We Don't Know" section was to continually reinforce the "embrace uncertainty" message.

Assess Phase

Did it work? In fact it started working faster than we ever anticipated. Figure 4 is a graph of employee responses to two Pulse Report questions, "I understand the direction of the plant" and "I understand why the plant is headed in the direction it is." In both cases, after only 6 months employees began to report greater agreement with those statements. In fact, within two years the percentage of employees who felt they understood the plant's direction increased from 20% to 80%. Moreover, management resistance to the strategy of providing rapid, and admittedly incomplete, information started to melt away.

What Lessons Did We Learn?

We learned a number of lessons about communication strategy, in general, and about communicating uncertainty in particular:

First, use redundancy and repetition to communicate the core messages over an extended time period. This demonstrates that executives are serious about their quest. Repetition increases the odds that everyone will at least hear the core messages. This is often challenging for executives because they are easily bored. It takes a degree of fortitude to recognize that even though they have said it a hundred times before, it may well be the first time certain employees have heard the message from an executive.

Redundancy is more challenging than repetition. We defined *redundancy* as communicating a similar message in different ways, like a stop sign that uses language, shape, and color to send the same message. Thinking of clever ways to signal a similar theme provides a wonderful opportunity to find all kinds of links to specific examples of the core messages. For instance, one unit of the manufacturing plant described in the case was the first to start quickly processing smaller orders. The plant manager seized on this situation and discussed how employees from this unit were "embracing uncertainty" by successfully adapting to rapidly changing customer demands. His praise delivered in quarterly meeting provided reinforcement of the core message while also recognizing those particular employees and motivating others. Moreover, the redundancy provided subtle but potent hints about the future implications of the core messages. In this case, the notion of "embracing uncertainty" was clearly linked to becoming more flexible. Recall that we believed that employees needed to embrace uncertainty before we pushed the flexibility message. Otherwise, we would have pushed a response to an unseen need.

Second, allow the core messages to evolve over time. There is a point of diminishing returns when all that can be accomplished with particular core messages has been accomplished. Finding that point may be tricky. Awareness of the core messages is not enough. Instead acting in accordance with them is the critical issue. Assessment tools, like the Pulse Report, can provide useful insights, but this tool probably measures employee awareness more than actions. Other signs, such as the spontaneous use of a core message to justify a decision or employees telling "success stories" related to the core notions may be more valuable. In our experience, it takes at least a year to effectively underscore key messages.

As we hinted before, "embracing uncertainty" was only the starting point. After executives, managers, and employees began to "talk the talk" and "walk the walk" they realized how few tools they had for effectively dealing with uncertainty. In essence, the "embrace uncertainty" message created a need with no related solution. Obviously, the next core message should address the concern. In fact, the following year, the executive team decided to push the idea that everyone needs to develop prescience. They defined "prescience" as "effectively anticipating and adapting to the likely future".

Clearly, this ability was directly linked to the uncertainty message. But it had several other advantages. First, it was more proactive. Those who are prescient are not helpless; they are actively involved in a host of activities designed to improve the accuracy of their predictions. Second, it highlighted the fact that no one can perfectly predict the future. Even the weather service is constantly improving their predictive capabilities; the uncertain is ever-present. Likewise, the plant had to be prepared to address many issues as they arise. Third, it underscored the fact that the plant was entering into unknown territory. Most employees were unfamiliar with the term. The necessary vocabulary lesson was symbolic of learning a new language. This did, in fact, happen. "Cycle time", "speed", "pulse on the plant" and "time to market" were phrases that started to be regularly bandied about.

Third, utilize employees at all organizational levels to communicate the core messages. Executives often make the mistake of assuming sole responsibility for communicating core messages. Clearly they have a fundamental responsibility but the strategy can not be sustained through their efforts alone. Managers and employees need to be an integral part of the process. In this case, managers were asked to routinely brief employees about what they knew and importantly what they did *not* know. Training was

provided and every two weeks a "Briefing Points" memorandum was circulated to all supervisors. This was a way to underscore the inherent uncertainty of information, regardless of the source. This turned out to be quite a culture shock. As one employee said after an executive's briefing, "after all these years, it's nice to see management admit they don't know everything".

Fourth, anticipate and properly respond to employee resistance points. Almost any core message worth communicating will make many employees uncomfortable. Consequently, they will ignore or resist the underlying objectives of the strategy. Skillful executives learn to use the resistance as a persuasive opportunity. Instead of minimizing employee concerns, they acknowledge, legitimize, and objectify them. Often concerns are linked to some vague feelings of unease related to the perceived loss of status or fear of the unknown. Other concerns are more specific such as fear of economic loss or disruption of routines. In either case, effective executives *explore* the resistance as a means to *underscore* the key messages.

Employees don't naturally embrace uncertainty. In fact, despite their protestations, many crave certainty. Their concerns about uncertainty are often obliquely expressed. In this case, two common employee refrains were heard: "I don't feel like I'm hearing the whole story", and "How am I supposed to plan my week in this environment?" On the flip side of the same coin of concerns, supervisors complained, "I don't want to say anything until I know the whole story" and "If I make any kind of prediction about the future, it becomes a promise to employees." The concerns were mutually reinforcing and created a conundrum that had to be addressed if the strategy was to succeed. By linking the expressed concerns with those that were unarticulated, we were able to address successfully the underlying issue of both employees and supervisors. The expressed concern revolved around a fear of not having the "full story". The unarticulated concern revolved around *why* no one knew the "full story". Many employees felt, and supervisors feared, that executives were evil, stupid or helpless. In fact, no one knew or would ever know the "whole story" and that was the fundamental unspoken fear implicit in the expressed concerns. That is why planning and prediction were so precarious. How does one plan, organize, communicate and function in such a situation? Executives directly addressed the issue by telling different kinds of stories - tales that evolved like those of a meteorologist, without a clear beginning and ending point. Unlike previous narratives, executives highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability. And so, that is

exactly how the concerns were addressed: "This may be shocking but we are not certain if this new product will succeed. We believe it will but we will have to keep you posted."

Fifth, plan on frequently discussing the future and job security. One of the surprising results of the exploring part of the strategy was how frequently the issue of the future and job security popped up. The Pulse Report allowed randomly selected employees to "ask the plant manager" one question on a bi-weekly basis. Over the course of a year, these two issues were the central themes about 80% of the time. This occurred despite the fact that the plant manager routinely addressed the concerns. The frequent appearance of similar concerns in the Pulse Report vividly demonstrated to executives and supervisors that communicating once about a subject is never enough. Even though they may have tired of the subjects, they learned that employees' communication needs on these issues was almost insatiable.

However, the character of those concerns did change over time. Initially job security issues naturally attracted the most attention. While reassurance about job security was always necessary, in time, the future became the predominant issue. Employees wanted to know about future products, marketing plans, new customers, and the success of research efforts. Some executives were amazed at the sudden upsurge of interest in these kinds of issues. But it really should not have been a surprise. Their interest was akin to always watching the weather reports and "planning" their activities accordingly. In short, the high level of interest was an indication that employees were embracing uncertainty because they were learning to watch the metaphorical "weather reports" and accordingly, plan their activities.

Sixth, use the core messages to frame auxiliary issues. Executives can't ignore other issues just because they have decided on a few core messages. But focus can be maintained by properly framing those concerns. Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr in their insightful book, *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership*, describe the process as follows:

The essential tool of the manager of meaning is the ability to frame. To determine the meaning of a subject is to make sense of it, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations.²³

The frame acts as a lens through which the other issues are viewed, highlighting certain images and refracting others. Plant managers, for example, simply can not ignore safety concerns, even though it may not be one of the core messages. But the safety issue can be framed or seen through a different lens. In this case, that is exactly what executives did when communicating about safety. They talked about the unique safety issues that occur in rapidly changing and uncertain environments. As a result, the core message was reinforced while a special aspect of the safety issue was highlighted.

Seventh, align the communication tools with the core messages. In most organizations there is a strong temptation to use the same communication tools regardless of the core messages. Fortunately, the executives in this case did not succumb to the lure of the traditional. If they had, they never would have understood the depth of employee concerns. Moreover, the traditional tools would have subtly undermined the core messages. The traditional quarterly meeting and newsletter simply would not have provided the rapid transmission of information and framing necessary in a highly uncertain atmosphere; a quarterly weather report is not terribly useful. Instead the Pulse Report and regular supervisor meetings supported the strategy.

The choice to embrace uncertainty was not an easy one, nor was the choice to systematically develop a communication strategy; most people crave certainty and are inattentive to their communication strategies. Yet, the merits of both choices are virtually unassailable. Uncertainty is a fact of corporate life. How executives choose to manage it has an important influence on their organization's effectiveness. And the communication strategy that executives embrace has a great deal to do with how effectively the organization manages uncertainty.

Endnotes

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Figure 1
Are We Talking in the Circle?

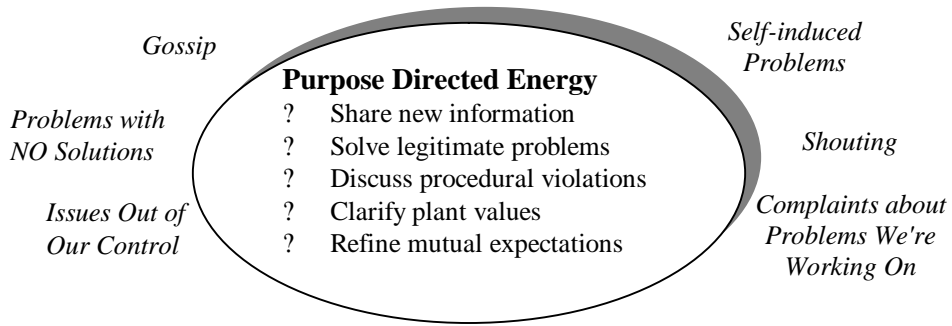


Figure 2
Strategy Continuum

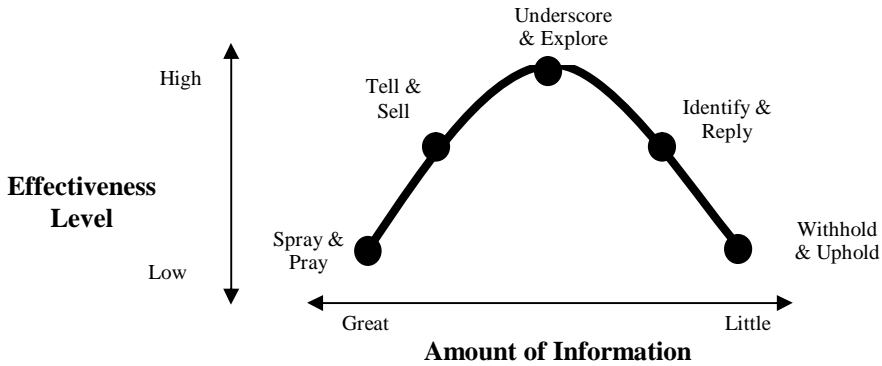
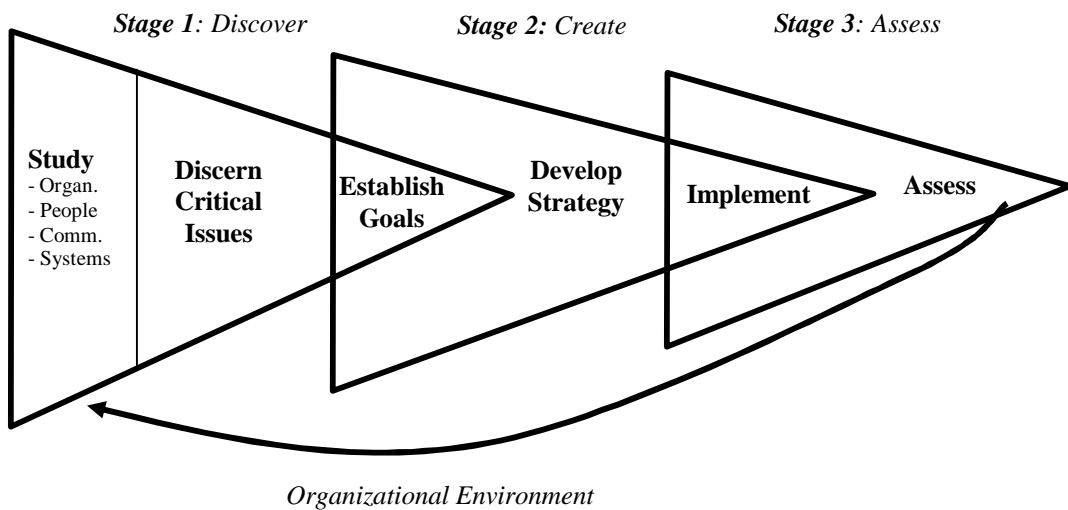
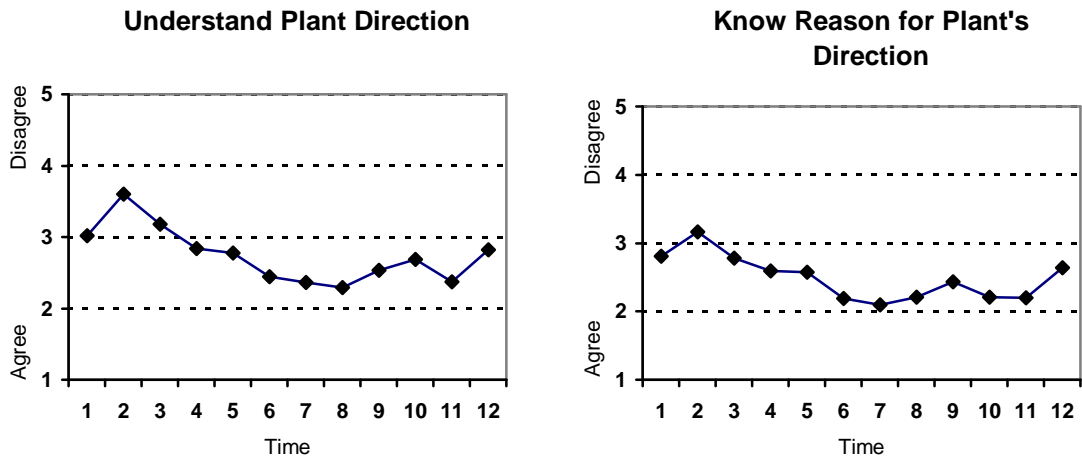


Figure 3
Developing a Communication Strategy



**Figure 4
Pulse Report Trends**



**Table 1
Evaluations of Strategies**

	Links to Goals	Legitimizes Issues	Shapes Memory	Makes Sense of Org. Events	Provides Identity	Evolves
Spray & Pray						X
Tell & Sell	X	X	X		X	X
Underscore & Explore	X	X	X	X	X	X
Identify & Reply		X	X	X		X
Withhold & Uphold						X