

What HR can learn from politicians, sales

HR is suffering the consequences of a tired communication model

It's no secret that, in many circles, HR is not considered a key organizational player. This is true despite the profession's competent members, their sizable accomplishments and sincere passion.

Unfortunately, passion and commitment aren't always enough. Many business leaders still feel HR speaks a different language. Somehow, the profession has yet to effectively communicate its full, true value.

What helps maintain this problem is a reliance on a tired communication model. It's a model most people use habitually, but HR has more visibly suffered the consequences.

Under this communication model, ideas, opinions and information are viewed as a commodity to be transmitted efficiently from sender to receiver. It's a mechanistic approach that focuses on the sender, not the receiver. The problem is that this model erodes HR's ability to influence people and environments.

Successful politicians and salespeople have long been practising a very different approach. They tailor their message and language to people's priorities, their aspirations and fears. When they do a good job of it, voters respond with the desired ballot choice and buyers enthusiastically pull out their chequebooks.

This influence-driven approach is not new, yet it has not gained the popularity it deserves. To boost their collective profile, HR professionals should consider incorporating it into their tool kit.

The influence-driven model

In the influence-driven model, the emphasis is on shaping how the audience interprets and absorbs the message. Communication is not about information, nor is it about the sender. It's about sales and influence.

If you want people to buy into your ideas, you've got to package and sell them. Packaging involves crafting the message in an audience-friendly fashion. It can soften the blow of bad news, minimize resistance or enlist support for initiatives.

A non-profit organization I recently worked with was about to launch a new human resources information system (HRIS) at the tail end of another massive initiative that had left employees exhausted. Their communication plan was based on the old model: "Convey the information with clarity and accuracy and emphasize the importance of this initiative to the organization."



GUEST COMMENTARY

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Makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Well, had they acted on this strategy, their worn-out staff would likely have responded with a mutiny of sorts.

Instead, we first analysed the landscape: What are employees' dominant emotions? How do the advantages of the HRIS connect with employees' sensibilities? What reservations and objections might the information encounter?

Once these questions were answered, the communication plan no longer revolved around clarity and efficiency. It had now become about mobilizing burnt-out, drained people.

Tune into audience's frequency

When a radio station is not set to the correct frequency, the music will not sound clearly. It will be patchy and irritating. In the same way, when HR professionals communicate with other professionals within their organizations, the audience possesses specific "listening frequencies," shaped by their position, world view and priorities. Failing to tailor the message to fit into the frequency and mental schemas of the audience is what often leads people to perceive HR as "not getting it."

HR also needs to account for the "what's-in-it-for-me" schema that inevitably affects people's listening. The more personal benefit people perceive, the more they will buy into the ideas.

So, consider in advance what mental schemas might influence the way the audience will hear and interpret the message and how it will benefit them. Then craft the message accordingly.

It's really not that hard to do. If you want the vice-president of sales to send his people to a two-day conflict management training, chances

are slim that he'll eagerly agree, no matter how skilfully you sing the program's praises. That old communication model simply won't work.

With the influence-based model, you'd plan a message that accounts for the vice-president's chronic struggle to meet targets and the challenges of retaining high performers. Chances are he's also a competitive type who strives to look good. You can be sure to get his attention with a message that features hard data and anecdotes that demonstrate collaborative environments increase both productivity and retention. For even more punch, you'd add that it would be great to boost his sales numbers just before the next company-wide meeting.

Pre-empt reservations and objections

Sometimes you will need to present a plan or recommendation knowing in advance the audience will raise objections or reservations.

Some of us will march in there and ram our message down everyone's throat with a "That ought to show 'em!" attitude. Others will waste their entire preparation time stressing about the potential opposition and then do an abysmal job when the moment arrives.

In the influence-driven model, you consider all possible objections in advance. You imagine yourself in their shoes and mentally experiment with what their concerns may be. Then you develop strategies to address the objections right at the outset of your communication.

If you're about to present a new initiative at a meeting, and know some attendees are likely to raise cost-related objections, open by stating the idea you're about to present raises cost concerns and you'll be addressing some of these in the presentation itself. Add that you know some colleagues will want a chance to talk about their reservations and therefore after you complete the presentation you'll welcome tough questions.

Now that they know their reservations will be heard, your colleagues will be able to sit back and listen with an open mind. The chances of your plan being accepted have exponentially improved, as are the chances of you being relaxed and doing an altogether better job at conveying your ideas.

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