

Planning effective internal communication

To be effective, internal communication must have a purpose, and be planned and put into practice in a way that achieves the intended, ideally measurable, outcomes and clearly links individual behaviours and practices to organisational values and priorities. It doesn't just happen by chance.

A communication policy, strategy and plan(s) provide a workable framework, doing away with 'scattergun' approaches that can be very wasteful and do not contribute to either the organisation's goals or workforce performance and productivity as much as they could.

Communication policy

Communication deserves its own policy, sending out a clear message that your organisation takes it seriously as well as providing a clear reference point to manage people's expectations. It may cover external communication, such as media relations, corporate documents, and relevant regulation (e.g. confidentiality, privacy) and legislation (e.g. Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts). Your policy should also set out standards, behaviours and commitments relating to internal communication.

This might include specific commitments to:

- openness and transparency, such as certain information (e.g. on safety issues or performance) being regularly brought to the attention of staff
- have systems in place enabling staff to contribute ideas and raise concerns
- how the organisation responds to staff feedback, including speed and level of response
- ensuring a variety of products and channels are used so communication is accessible and no one is excluded from it
- provide all staff with opportunities to develop communication skills.

Communication professionals

Your policy may cover the role of your in-house communication team, clarifying their specific responsibilities, what authority they have to make decisions (e.g. allocation of resources, approving content, developing and managing channels), what information they can access and how they should be involved, particularly at top level, to set and drive the communication agenda.

Specific policies

Your overall policy could incorporate some more detailed policy, such as your organisation's use of social media, which carries an element of risk. Content cannot always be controlled and there may consequently be legal or reputational issues to using it. Your social media policy may set out certain restrictions (e.g. not naming individual colleagues in posts) or a commitment to minimal moderation of staff comments.

Embedding communication in other policies

Your communication policy should be aligned to communication where this is part of other organisational policies, such as ensuring communication is accessible as part of your equality and diversity policy.

Communication strategy

Your communication strategy builds on the commitments set out in your policy, and articulates what the organisation really wants to achieve from its internal communication and how to deliver these outcomes. It should also be closely connected to your corporate and operational priorities, enabling you to allocate resources (including time and personnel) accordingly.

A workable communication strategy should include SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) objectives:

- for communication itself. These may be long-term (e.g. making best use of resources, consistent evaluation) or short-term (e.g. developing processes or training)
- for communication in relation to specific priorities, organisational goals and values (e.g. better communication of good practice in certain areas of care, regular reviews and updates of clinical guidance).

Communication planning

Communication needs to be constant. You want to plan ahead to optimise your resources, so communication activity is not last minute and you take a coherent, consistent approach that is appropriate for your various audiences (specific groups as well as the workforce as a whole).

Your ongoing plan(s) may include time-limited campaigns and one-off activities, but never assume you only need say something once. A detailed plan should enable you to keep checking things are working and that the purpose of a communication activity remains valid and feasible.

Communication tools and channels are changing all the time – are you still using the best ones for the job?

Plans should set out the resources required for each activity (including skills), timescales (e.g. to prepare staff for the introduction of new regulation) and take into account other issues such as accessibility and the availability of information (e.g. national policy or data) to support specific communication. Part of your planning should focus on how communication can be evaluated against intended outcomes, which may be certain actions or changes in behaviour or attitude. Regular monitoring will allow you to review your tactics and amend them if necessary.

Crisis communication

It is important to include crisis communication in your planning, so that in such situations staff receive a steady flow of relevant, factual and timely information, aligned to your organisation's emergency response plans. Your plan should clarify agreed protocols and responsibilities, including handling sensitive materials and information from elsewhere that relates to what is happening within your own organisation, and incorporate relevant contact details.

Significant thought needs to be given to internal communication across your organisation to ensure it is effective in helping your staff do their jobs well, in creating a supportive working environment and in making the best use of your resources to achieve specific outcomes related to corporate and operational priorities. Comprehensive communication policies, strategies and plans set clear goals and make it easier to monitor whether these are being met.