Measuring and evaluating internal communication

Communication with your workforce is not an abstract concept that can only be evaluated in general terms through a few questions in the annual staff survey. Measuring whether internal communication activity is effective is necessary to make the most of your resources and have the best possible impact on your organisation's goals and on individual attitudes and behaviours.

Purpose and outcomes

Every communication activity should have a particular purpose, agreed at the planning stage, one or more outcomes, and indicators to measure whether these are being achieved. This will allow you to review strategy and tactics and amend approaches accordingly.

Outcomes should be meaningful, such as:
- Specific actions
- Specific behaviours
- Specific attitudes.

If the purpose of the communication is to address a particular problem, you should be able to develop a baseline against which you can track progress. Here are some simple examples.

Activity	Outcomes and indicators
Open board meetings where staff can raise concerns and put forward ideas for improvement	Variety of staff attend and actively contribute; their suggestions are acted upon
Communication skills training developed and offered to all staff	Discussed regularly in personal development meetings; growing take-up of training
Data on quality and safety made available on staff intranet	More hits on relevant page; steady flow of comments, including suggestions for improvement and examples of good practice
Review and revision of a set of instructions	Fewer errors; fewer requests for help to complete the task

Negative outcomes
It is worth noting any rumour and conjecture about a particular issue, or frequent requests for clarification. They may be signs that communication is not working in a specific area and needs attention.

Measurement and evaluation tools

Think creatively about how you can measure whether communication is effective.

Staff surveys
It can be hard to capture people's true feelings about communication. Big annual staff surveys are unlikely to provide the level of detail required to evaluate specific communication activities and generate a useful level of insight into what forms of communication make a difference.

Targeted surveys seeking the views of a few relevant staff about a particular communication activity – such as the introduction of revised guidance – both immediately and then some time later, should show whether they are aware of the guidance, if they are using it and how helpful it is.

Focus groups

Involving staff at the communication planning stage has particular value. Testing a product in development, such as a leaflet or set of instructions, on a group of the people it is aimed at makes it more likely to be effective. This is a chance to check whether it is clear, complete, meaningful, easy to understand and of real use to them in their work, and to adapt accordingly – and learn lessons for the future – if it is not.

Feedback

Analysis of staff feedback, including complaints, online comments and contributions, can go further than what is actually said. It can be helpful to see who feedback is from and whether certain groups are under- or over-represented; do some staff feel less able to speak up? Are there are any themes emerging that relate to communication generally rather than specific activities, such as frustration with particular channels or problems with accessing information?

Data

Your evaluation should not simply be a statement of activity – how many hits an intranet page got, how many staff attended an event or how many comments were posted as part of an online discussion. But this data can act as an indicator and be particularly useful in monitoring ongoing communication and judging when messages need to be repeated. For instance, communication about a new helpline might initially generate a lot more calls, but if this number falls over time people may need to be reminded that the helpline exists, and what they should use it for.

Anecdotal evidence

How effective communication is may often be measured by the way it makes people feel. Getting a handle on this can come down to anecdotal evidence. For instance, you could ask a sample of line managers if they feel confident they have enough information to deliver team briefings that cascade key messages. What response do they get from their teams? Do staff appear motivated and interested in what they hear, or cynical and distrustful?

Really listening to staff complaints about a system or process may flag up underlying issues with communication. For instance, the quantity of paperwork may be less of a problem than the way forms are designed, and staff may struggle to use equipment or carry out a task properly because instructions are unclear.

> When resources are tight and the pressure is on, 'nice to have' communication is a luxury you can't afford. All your communication should have a clear purpose and aim to achieve certain outcomes that can be measured in a variety of ways. Recording lessons learned from communication activities that are not effective in delivering the intended outcomes will be useful in planning future communication and minimising wasted time and effort.