

## **DANGER! DANGER!**

### **THE ICT GUYS ARE LOOSE AND HEADING YOUR WAY**

**(Why communications as just as important as equipment in technology change)**

#### **The Challenge**

If your agency or business is involved in a major Information Communication Technology (ICT) upgrade, the last thing you want is staff circling the wagons and resisting the changes.

Yet getting the new hardware, software and cables in place may be the easy part of your job. The technical challenges may be daunting but the toughest part could be the people issues.

After two decades of constant change in the corporate world and many unfulfilled IT promises, staff are often wary or even cynical when management announces new ICT arrangements.

ICT upgrades are as much about communications as they are about engineering. It seems that changing mindsets, negotiating turf wars and telling staff what is happening are just as important as sourcing, buying and installing new systems.

Professional communicators warn of programs that will be stuck in second gear unless managers and project teams address the so-called 'soft' people issues involved in a technology transition.

#### **The Roller Coaster of Change**

When employees face new technology they climb aboard a workplace roller coaster. At the top of the ride there is excitement at the prospect of a new system solving all their problems. Then comes the descent with the realisation that change is a complex process and cannot happen overnight. At the bottom of the ride there may be despair or cynicism until the climb upward begins and the new systems are installed and accepted.

For a major roll-out to succeed, a good communications plan needs to sit right in the same roller coaster trolley as a good network plan. It needs to be robust and thorough so it flattens out the highs and lows in people's expectations and wins support for the new program.

#### **Use the Power of Research**

Successful staff communications begins with identifying all the groups in the organization with interests in the new arrangements. Upfront research is an invaluable investment because it will uncover competing objectives, unrealistic expectations, what information people need and how and when they should receive it.

On-line surveys are useful for identifying the opinions of overseas or remotely based staff while one on one interviews and focus groups are good at tapping into the mindset of high priority

groups. But however you manage this research, collect information in a low key way to allay concerns and ensure expectations are not raised.

### **Key Elements for Successful Communication**

A successful ICT communications plan has four key elements:

- The commitment of the person at the top.
- Persuasive messages that show how the new setup will lead to an improved organization and better outcomes for staff. These are just as important as the “what is happening” messages.
- A system for people to feed in their concerns so they do not feel threatened and a way to provide information closely linked to their concerns.
- Someone who is responsible for the plan. Even if you engage outside help, some-one in the organization needs to own the communications process.

### **Choosing Who to Tell**

A logical place to kick off communications is to inform senior executives across the organization. These are the people who write the cheques, control the business processes and set the service standards.

And don't forget to include the HR managers especially if the new arrangements lead to job changes.

The most important people however are not on the top floor but on the shop floor. They are the front line managers who oversee the business processes on a day to day basis, supervise employees and deal with clients. They are the hands-on people and they can make or break a change because they are also the most credible and authoritative figures for everyone they deal with.

Their support is critical to a successful roll-out.

### **Tactics Tools and Tips**

Communicating change will differ from organization to organization but proven techniques include:

- Recruiting and supporting influential people who can act as “change champions”. These will be the people who others turn to for comment or advice during the technology transition.
- Continually supporting front line managers, getting and using their input and arming them with information.

- Cascading project briefings throughout the organization at the start and offering regular updates.
- Providing simple materials that let people absorb the whole project at a glance.
- Posting information to the Intranet and, during the implementation phase, also including self help functions.
- Getting staff involved through demonstrations and case studies that illustrate how things will improve in future.
- Regular updates through e-mails, electronic and printed newsletters and staff magazines.
- Deploying an onsite help team to help people during the early stages of implementation.

### **Succeeding in the End**

You climb a mountain when you introduce new technology into your workplace.

Everyone wants to arrive at the top fast, and enjoy the view of a better organization and smoother work processes. To get there with your team and technology intact, effective communications must be part of the process from the base camp to the summit.

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### **About Maine Street Marketing**

Maine Street Marketing provides communication strategies from fully geared national campaign plans to simpler strategies for one-off events.

Our clients often have limited budgets and are pressed for time. They want their communications to have impact, succeed and be accountable.

We save them time, money and effort by building on their past successes, exploring new ways to reach people and focussing their communications.

Bob Crawshaw is Managing Director of Maine Street Marketing. Bob will address the:

- Fifth National Public Affairs Convention in Canberra on 13 August.
- Australian Marketing Institute (ACT) conference at the National Press Club on 1 October.