

13. INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

13.1. Why internal communication in the public sector/government?

A key part of government's communication approach is the recognition that communication is central to all the service-delivery efforts of government.

Though government has made great strides in communicating with the public, in particular around the implementation of its programmes, it is clear that there is a need to complement public communication with improved internal communication to inform and mobilise public servants.

In 2006, Cabinet took a decision that internal communication in government should be strengthened to ensure that public service officials are kept abreast of what government is doing to deliver services to the broader public.

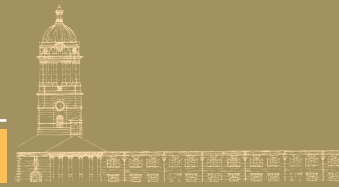
Messages from management should filter down to all employees to provide them with a better understanding of the purpose, goals and directions of government. There should also be methods in place for feedback from employees to upper management. Against this background, internal communication should be seen within the context of broader efforts to build a better performing state.

Clear, concise and consistent communication educates employees, enabling them to appreciate the value of their institutions' programmes and goals. It is a significant element in engaging employees and keeping them focused, committed and productive and aligning everyone's activities.

For government to communicate effectively with its employees, it needs a well-structured and managed internal communication unit that seeks to continually inform staff members of all the programmes and projects carried out in government departments.

A department's internal communication strategy should emerge from, and be guided by, among other things, the department's strategic objectives and its communication strategy, the National Communication Strategy Framework and the SoNA.

- Develop mechanisms so that employees are informed of important messages that are being communicated to outside stakeholders.
- Government employees are the ambassadors of government and should be able to reflect the vision of government through their work.



13.2. Strategic internal communication

Strategic internal communication impacts on an organisation's effectiveness dramatically. A strategic approach is needed to make sure that the focus is on the right things at the right time and that an impact is made.

The best way to do this is to develop an internal communication strategy (see *Strategy Development Template in Chapter 3*) that takes you from where you are now to where you want to be, and sketches how you will get there. It should be backed up by a detailed action plan:

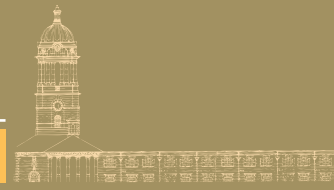
- Adding value to your organisation through performance-based communication.
- Using the most effective communication channels and media for your audiences – from blogs to print.
- Reinventing the role of the communication function from tactical implementers to strategic change managers .
- Engaging employees at all levels by connecting them to your organisation's goals and strategic plan for the future.
- Using leadership communication to build employee trust.
- Transforming your day-to-day operations to make them more citizen-centred and results-oriented
- Ensuring that managers at all levels manage communication well so people have the information when they need it to make the right decisions.
- Measuring the impact communication has on relevant performance measures such as quality, service and cost.
- Aligning your internal and external communication strategies to ensure continuity within your organisation and advance your objectives.
- Fostering mission-focused employee behaviour and culture to support agency goals.
- Utilising your intranet to inform, align and invigorate employees.
- Focusing your message to cut through the clutter and deliver your information effectively.
- Developing an internal branding campaign, communicating with your employees to build your brand, change their behaviour and impact on your organisation's bottom line .
- Using a balanced scorecard approach to manage and measure your internal communication programme.
- Getting support from senior leadership and key stakeholders.

13.2.1. Developing an internal communication strategy

It is important to develop an internal communication strategy, which sets out internal communication objectives and how they will be achieved.

The following are suggested as starting points for a communication strategy:

- Convince top management of the importance of communication.
- Build alliances across the organisation to support initiatives.
- Recognise that no single method will be effective.
- Use a mix of approaches and use all available channels where relevant (written, face-to-face, web-based, moving images).



- Target the form(s) of communication to the audience; for example, it may well be appropriate to use different methods for shop-floor employees and senior managers.
- Respect cultural diversity and vary approaches accordingly. This is particularly important in a multinational context, but also bear in mind South Africa's cultural diversity.
- Make sure that messages are consistent, over time and between audiences.
- Ensure clarity of message and keep things as simple as possible. For example, in written communication use short, sharp sentences or phrases – sometimes even without verbs.
- Train managers in communication skills and ensure that they understand the importance of communication.
- Seek wherever possible to develop and sustain two-way communication, dialogue and feedback.
- Ask yourself whether employees feel that the culture of the organisation is such that they can say what they think without discomfort; and if they can't, think about how that culture can be changed.
- Consider whether communication is built into the planning stages of all activities.
- Review communication initiatives to check what has worked, what hasn't, and why.

It is important that the strategy should involve plenty of two-way communication. Make sure that a pledge to “listen to staff” is backed up by visible action; otherwise your improved communication is likely to be met with cynicism rather than trust.

A good internal communication action plan will tie in directly with the strategy, setting out the activities, targets, deadlines and resources needed to implement each element of the strategy. It will also identify lead officers responsible for each action, and build in evaluation so that you can monitor the success of each action.

The action plan is a working document that can be updated and revised as targets are met, circumstances change or new objectives are identified.

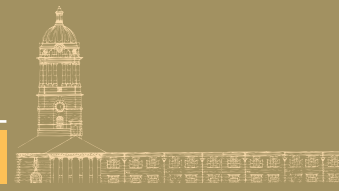
13.3. Principles of internal communication

Effective internal communication is planned to deal with specific issues for the long-term well-being of the organisation.

13.3.1. Timeliness and content

Providing timely and relevant information to public servants, through channels they use and trust and in languages they understand, remains the basis for successful and strategic internal communication.

Communication content should provide context and rationale for changes or new initiatives as they relate to the Public Service, but especially to the relative performance or requirements of public servants in departmental work units. This underlines the importance of the supervisor's front-line role in communication.



13.3.2. Channels

Face-to-face communication is the richest medium. It should be emphasised in internal communication, especially to resolve conflicts or crises, communicate major changes and celebrate accomplishments.

Excellent listening skills reduce errors and misunderstanding, help uncover problems, save time, improve evaluations and facilitate relationship-building. The development of excellent listening skills among leaders at all levels in the Public Service is crucial.

Social media are fast and powerful dialogue-creating channels that can empower and engage public servants and members. They influence and alter traditional media and their uses, but don't eliminate them. Communicators should blend new and traditional media in ways that help the Public Service to best achieve its goals and enhance relationships with internal publics.

13.3.3. Leadership roles

The CEO or senior leader(s) must be a visible and open champion for internal communication. Visibility is the first and most basic form of non-verbal communication for leaders.

The communication style of leaders should invite open, ongoing and transparent discussion so that people are willing to voice their opinions and suggestions.

The actions of leaders at all levels must match their words. This has everything to do with credibility and the extent to which employees will trust, commit to and follow leaders.

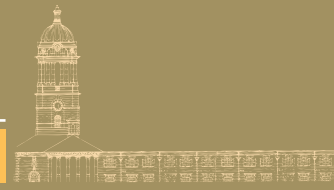
13.3.4. Professional communicator roles

Professional communicators must see themselves as internal experts on communication who serve as facilitators and counsellors to executives and managers and provide strategic support for business plans.

Communicators must also be public service experts. They must possess knowledge of the Public Service's structures, challenges and objectives, as well as understand public servants' issues and needs and marketplace requirements and realities.

13.3.5. Participation and recognition

Encouraging public servants' participation in decision-making builds loyalty and commitment and improves the overall climate for communication in the Public Service. Participative decision-making also often improves the quality of decisions.



Recognising and celebrating achievements at all levels help build shared values and organisational identity. Similar social events, rites and rituals contribute to and reflect a distinctive culture in the Public Service.

13.3.6. Measurement

Measurement is a key to successful communication in any organisation or government department. Through diverse forms and approaches, measurement helps define problems, determines the status quo, records progress, assesses value and provides a factual basis for future direction and action. Improving measurement knowledge and practice is an ongoing professional requirement.

13.3.7. Culture

Ongoing two-way communication is the foundation for employee motivation and organisational success. Two-way communication provides continuous feedback, which is crucial to learning and to processing change in the Public Service.

In addition to achieving specific goals, internal communication should help create and reflect a culture for communication, where public servants at all levels feel free to openly share ideas, opinions and suggestions. This will enhance employee understanding, build trust, stimulate engagement and encourage greater diversity.

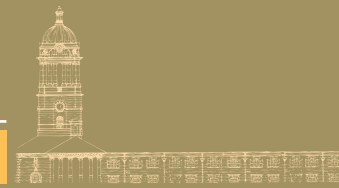
13.4. How will employees benefit from internal communication?

Strategic internal communication can do more than keep employees informed – it creates a positive state of mind. It can ensure that they work towards a common goal through clear direction and vision. This reduces the capacity for workplace conflict and encourages a knowledge-sharing environment that motivates for better performance and a “bigger-picture” approach.

Internal communication is a vital means of addressing organisational concerns and, if done successfully, helps employees to understand the organisation’s vision, values and culture and establishes formal roles and responsibilities for them.

By maintaining open lines of communication between management and employees, effective internal communication can enhance stronger relationships throughout all levels of the organisation and forge a sense of community.

Internal communication empowers employees, gives them accountability, responsibility and better performance results from a common understanding of the business/organisation. This often improves coordination and co-operation between departments. Employees can readily see how their contribution impacts on the company and its performance.



Benefits:

- Internal communication provides best-practice tools and techniques for organising your department to achieve maximum results.
- A department is able to distinguish itself enough to attract and retain the best and brightest employees and therefore has a strong sense of culture, one that employees help create and want to participate in. Employees feel comfortable enough to not only recognise and accept change and growth, but to participate and lead it.
- Employees at all levels engage in a dialogue to become intimately involved in the organisation and its daily interaction with its stakeholders. Employees can readily see they are working for something larger than themselves, some greater cause, and thus can see the effect of their efforts on the bigger picture.
- Clear communication engenders a strategic discussion about your department and its industry, leading to continuous improvement and innovation that anticipates and addresses market needs. In internal communication, common planning frameworks are needed to ensure consistency and coherence.
- Employees who are better informed are more satisfied, feel more involved in the fate of your organisation and ultimately contribute more to your success. Departments that make internal communication a priority are more likely to reach their objectives with motivated employees. In turn, you can resolve conflicts quickly and improve employee productivity.
- Employees can make more decisions themselves since they have the tools and knowledge to know the “right” decisions in line with the organisation’s goals.

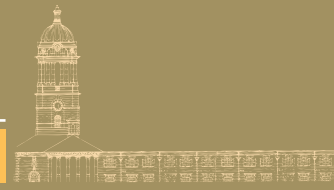
13.5. Current status of internal communication in government

Cabinet mandated the GCIS in 2006 to intensify internal communication within the Public Service. This pronouncement by Cabinet was in recognition of the fact that government is the largest employer in the country and as such we need to talk to our people so that they can support our programmes and messages.

In November 2006, the GCIS established the Internal Communication Forum. The forum brings together all internal communicators who share views and case studies in support of government’s communication programme.

Currently, many departments that have an internal communication unit only focus on disseminating departmental information to their staff members. There is not enough done within departments to promote the implementation of the government’s PoA and looking at strategic internal communication.

Internal Communication’s function is to establish and maintain platforms to effectively reach out to public servants in the department via, for example, the intranet, internal publications, notice boards and news flashes. It conducts research on platforms, media, products and language preferences to deepen public servants’ understanding of



departmental programmes. It facilitates the communication of top management decisions to all staff members, including matters relating to ethics in the Public Service and departmental and government policies.

Internal communication in the Public Service is underpinned by the following principles:

- In designing internal communication programmes, experience has shown that there is a need to supplement communication on the ethics of the Public Service with more communication that builds an understanding of the content of departmental programmes.
- There is a need to move beyond circulars and workshops as products and platforms for internal communication in the Public Service, because these alone cannot be sufficient to mobilise for implementation of government's mandate. Therefore, careful thought should be given to media, products and platforms that will effectively reach public servants in a manner that mobilises them for implementation.
- Experience has also shown that content for internal communication within a department can be a contested terrain between what is strictly the mandate of a department, and what is broadly a government mandate. In dealing with this challenge, it is important that the internal government communicator fully appreciates the centrality of government's PoA (within which departmental programmes fall) in designing internal communication programmes. However, it should also be appreciated that there is important work that gets done by government, which might not be included in the government's PoA.
- Distribution coordination remains a challenge in escalating internal communication efforts in the Public Service. It is therefore important that the internal communicator should have a distribution plan for the information products (to be) developed, and that the GCIS will assist in sourcing relevant information material from departments for internal communicators to distribute to public servants.

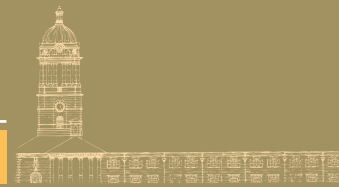
13.5.1. Internal communication units in departments

An internal communication unit is responsible for disseminating information within government. An internal communicator ensures that there is a two-way communication process within the department. It informs the employees on the latest news and developments in the organisation. An internal communicator creates platforms for employees to communicate with management on issues affecting the day-to-day running of the department.

Government's internal communicators are responsible for developing and implementing an internal communication strategy, which should be part of the overall departmental strategy. It is important that internal communicators should understand the role, vision and corporate objectives of government and how its different departments deliver services.

13.5.2. Duties may include some or all of the following tasks:

- Ensuring all staff have access to a range of internal communication, so they are able to keep up to date with important news, share information and raise concerns, for example through team meetings, managers' meetings, one-on-one meetings between staff and managers, briefings and email updates by senior staff.



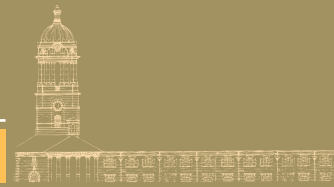
- Managing the compilation and distribution of the internal staff newsletter, including writing and editing content, arranging photography, overseeing design (and production and print if it is produced in hard copy).
- Managing the development of the department's intranet, including working with information technology specialists on the structure and design and working with colleagues across the departments to create suitable content.
- Consulting with staff across the department to gain their views on internal communication content and their suggestions for improvements.
- Using staff feedback to recommend and implement new initiatives to improve internal communication.
- Providing advice and guidance to staff on the use of government's corporate branding and identity.
- Developing and implementing an internal communication plan (informed by the departmental communication strategy) with key milestones, combining both departmental activities and government's PoA.
- Developing content for various products and establishing and maintaining platforms to effectively reach out to public servants in the department (for example, internal publications, intranet, notice boards and news flashes)
- Distributing material in the department, including to provincial departments and/or offices.
- Conducting quantitative or qualitative research on platforms, media, products and language preferences to deepen the public servants' understanding of departmental and government's PoA on a regular basis.
- Organising internal departmental events, including celebrations of national commemorative days, DG and Deputy Minister/Minister's staff addresses.
- Motivating staff members to become ambassadors of the government brand and ensuring that all work towards strengthening the partnership to escalate service delivery.
- Facilitating the communication of top management decisions to all staff members, including matters related to ethics in the Public Service and departmental and government policies.

13.6. Planning for internal communication

Unlike with external communication, departments often fail to strategically plan their internal communication. In other words, internal communication is usually either arbitrary or incomplete and if planned, tends to be planned only in reaction to specific events that forces interaction with workers. Effective internal communication should be a well-planned process that deals with the broad range of issues within the departmental communication strategic goals.

Some basic principles to keep in mind when creating your strategic internal communication plan are:

- develop a long-term focus
- identify clear values for your organisation
- define the specific goals for your internal communication strategy
- use comprehensive and pervasive methods
- be consistent in your messages.



13.6.1. Understanding your internal communication needs?

It is important to identify and understand the internal communication needs. This will definitely vary considerably from department to department. It is likely that you will find that your department has a number of areas where internal communication can be improved, with some being more important than others. These needs, and their varying level of importance, will directly inform your internal communication strategy.

It is important to not only rely on employees taking action to read your internal news. Email inboxes are flooded, and only a small percentage of staff remembers to check the corporate website and intranet regularly. The only way to ensure that staff read your vital corporate information is to GRAB their attention!

The key challenge of any communication programme is to attract the target audience's attention. People pay attention to messages that are relevant to them. Relevance is created by need (I have to pay attention, as this is key to my job performance) or by desire (this message sounds like it could improve my life).

13.6.2. Internal communication channels/platforms

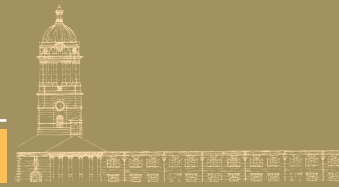
Methods

There are many methods of communicating with employees. This section discusses these, starting with traditional top-down methods and moving on to those that are aimed at dialogue.

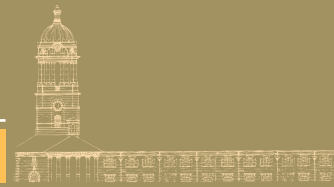
It should be remembered throughout that audiences differ, and that different techniques may need to be used for different audiences. Departmental size is also important; communication is much easier in a single-site establishment than in a multinational organisation, especially where different languages and cultures are involved.

Developments in technology, notably web-based technologies, have increased the range of options in recent years. Intranet and email-based communication are probably now more important than traditional methods such as printed newsletters. One of the benefits of electronic communication is immediacy, and (just as important) enabling immediate feedback. However, it needs to be remembered that in some organisations, not all employees – for example, shop-floor employees or drivers – have access to email or intranet.

- **Notice boards/bulletin boards:** These are part of the furniture, and as such may be ignored. They can get scruffy unless regularly policed. Not for important announcements. Today, there are also electronic bulletin boards, but again they may be ignored by some staff.
- **Newsletters/in-house magazines:** These are regularly produced and may carry features on individual employees and events, as well as organisational news. Nowadays, they may be distributed electronically rather than printed. They can have a role to play in integrated communication policies, but does everyone read them?
- **Letters:** Addressed to individual employees and perhaps sent to their home addresses, letters should be reserved for issues of major importance, but are more likely to be read than internal memos or emails.



- **Video and in-house television:** These are potentially useful, although expensive in larger organisations for introducing, for example, new products or policies. However, badly-produced in-house videos gained a reputation in the 1980s and 1990s as vehicles for management propaganda, so they should be used sparingly. In a few large organisations, in-house television is also used, delivered to employees' desktops. However, television and video are mainly passive, not a dialogue. People are visually sophisticated these days, so the production must be good.
- **Emails and intranets:** Messages via email can be targeted to particular groups and sent rapidly, but in some non-office environments not everyone has access to email, so other methods may be needed. Feedback facilities can be incorporated in intranets, so there is some opportunity for two-way communication. Employee-attitude surveys (see below) may be conducted by email.
- **Presentations:** Presentations directed to the workforce by a senior manager can be powerful, although very dependent on the delivery skills of the individual. PowerPoint can add to the experience, but should not be overdone. Time should be allowed for questions and answers, but this is not full two-way communication – many employees may be nervous about having a full and frank public discussion with the boss.
- **Team briefings/group meetings:** Messages are delivered by local managers to established work groups. Here, communication can be face-to-face and a proper dialogue is more possible. Nevertheless, there are dangers. If the same message is intended to be given by various managers, they may deliver it with different emphases, leading to misunderstandings. The scope for misunderstanding may increase where some members of the workforce are not first-language English speakers. There can also be hidden expenses in terms of lost time.
- **Employee-attitude surveys:** These surveys are one way in which management can find out about employees' views and concerns, though the right questions need to be asked (because the questions are devised by managers, they may not reflect what employees would like to be asked).
- **Focus groups:** Focus groups are another way of achieving qualitative feedback.
- **Face-to-face meetings with managers:** Individuals can express their views directly to line managers. They are potentially good methods of two-way feedback, but managers need to understand the importance of upward transmission, and success may depend on how consistently they behave in this respect.
- **Staging of social events:** Internal Communication organises the celebration of calendar days. Briefings on topics such as human rights, HIV and AIDS and women's rights are conducted to create awareness among staff. Celebrations are held a day or two before the actual event to allow staff the opportunity to celebrate.



Management By Walking About (MBWA)

Motivated, committed employees make for increased productivity and more profit. The way in which management communicates with them can be the key to successful motivation or an absolute confidence and commitment.

There is no doubt that a major contributor to the success of a business is the managers' capacity to interact with their employees as often as possible and to be seen to be leading by example – to cheer them on, motivate, encourage and perhaps even chastise them from time to time. Staff appreciates the personal attention that makes them feel special and part of a team or family.

It's not too difficult when one only has a few employees but the big challenge for any CEO/DG is to maintain this personal contact. Problems arise, for example, when this personal contact is no longer possible and it is replaced with a programme of internal communication.

There are very few people who have a problem with the notion of internal communication being the foundations of a well-run business. Even some accountants and bankers have been known to agree that communication with the rank and file is important and not just something else that marketers in the company have dreamed up to waste money.

However, what many, even seasoned marketers don't grasp is that communication is not only about word but very much to do with deed as well. Unfortunately, most of these programmes last about a week at best and then it's back to business as half-baked as usual – not because there is anything wrong with the programmes.

Senior and middle managers are urged to practise one of the most ignored aspects of communication and management pursuits – MBWA: Management By Walking About.

Perhaps the name itself is its biggest enemy, because it suggests either goofing off or a time-wasting and silly pastime in which no serious person would indulge. In fact, it is one of the most powerful internal communication and motivational tools ever invented.

REMEMBER

A planned approach to internal communication is as critical to long-term business success as an effective external communication strategy. Communication occurs whether planned or not. Without an organised internal communication strategy, the message received is left to chance. Take a proactive approach by creating fluid communication channels in both directions. Aligning the internal message(s) with the mission, vision, values and objectives is the key to the success of an internal communication strategy.