Six Communication Secrets of Top-Performing Organizations

by Bill Trahant

Through better communication, government executives and human capital professionals engage employees to improve organizational performance.

What communication best practices set top-performing organizations apart from lower-performing ones? Given the continuing focus in government on improving employee productivity and accelerating federal agency transformation, findings from Watson Wyatt's 2007/2008 Communication ROI study offer some tantalizing clues as to how government executives and human capital (HC) professionals can foster stronger employee engagement and drive improved organizational performance. Although the findings from *Secrets of Top Performers: How Companies with Highly Effective Communication Differentiate Themselves* are based on private-sector research, they hold tremendous relevance for government agencies that want to improve employee alignment and enhance operating effectiveness.

Study Findings

The study shows a strong correlation between effective employee communication and superior organizational performance. Organizations with the highest scores in effective employee communication (and the strongest organizational results) do many things differently from organizations with lower communication effectiveness scores. In particular, they do the following:

- Keep the customer front and center in all employee communication programs.
- Design communication programs that engage employees in "running the business."
- Work to continuously enhance the communication effectiveness of managers.
- Leverage the talents of internal communicators to manage change effectively.
- Measure the impact of employee communication on key business metrics.
- Maximize the employee experience "brand."

This article looks at each of these practices in detail and explores how government executives can apply them in a federal agency context.

Secret 1: Focus on the Customer
Private-Sector Findings

In highly effective companies, "putting the customer first" isn't just a slogan. Instead, top-performing companies ensure that employees understand how their actions actually affect the customer. They are fifteen times more likely than low-performing companies to keep managers and employees with direct customer contact focused on customer needs.

A strong customer focus can boost an employee's sense of pride and job security. Watson Wyatt's Global Work Attitudes surveys reveal, for example, that both customer focus and communication are key drivers of employee engagement, and customer focus is stronger when employees understand how the work they do affects the customer. The Communication ROI study, meanwhile, found that companies that use communication to facilitate this understanding are rewarded with improved business performance.

Public-Sector Applications

People who seek employment in the public sector are, in many cases, motivated by factors other than money. They are, according to Professor James Perry of Indiana University, more likely to be motivated by "altruism, a desire to do good, or to give back to one's community and country." It follows that whatever agencies can do to help public employees take pride in their work, see it as something special, and focus on their end customer—such as the U.S. taxpayer or a key stakeholder group in the U.S. population—is likely to increase individual employee motivation and engagement in serving the needs of the American public.

These efforts should start even before individuals become federal employees. Agencies should target recruiting at young men and women who want to improve people's lives and emphasize that public-service careers afford young people an opportunity to personally affect public governance and government decision making. John Palguta, vice president of policy at the Partnership for Public Service (PPS), often makes this argument when speaking to various federal agencies and to young college graduates, adding, "Some opportunities to act on public issues are only available through pursuing public-service careers."

Senior government executives and first-level supervisors alike should stress to new employees the social significance of the jobs they perform on behalf of the American public. They can do so by incorporating discussion of public-sector values into "onboarding" programs and activities, orientation, mentoring, and formal job training. ("*Onboarding* is the process of converting a candidate for a role into that role within an organization.") They should also promote so-called "pro-social" values and principles in the workplace. A growing body of research indicates that "stressing job significance and non-task-related values such as allegiance, teamwork, professionalism, and determination can be powerful motivators to many who work in the public sector," notes Perry. These values are key to building strong employee engagement and fostering strong teamwork around shared values and goals. In a public-sector context, strongly emphasizing such non-monetary job motivators can, in many instances, be more critical in strengthening employee focus and job performance than monetary incentives.

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Finally, structuring public-sector jobs so that employees can see the downstream benefits of their work strengthens job engagement and "customer focus." For example, agency leaders should give employees the opportunity to provide input into public policy development and implementation. They should also identify individuals or groups that directly benefit from the work that public-sector employees do and create opportunities for direct contact between federal employees and the beneficiaries of programs and services they manage or oversee.

Secret 2: Engage Employees in Running the Business
Private-Sector Findings

Not only do highly effective organizations focus more on the customer than low-performing ones, they're also much more likely to engage employees in running the business. Specifically, the 2007/2008 study found that highly effective organizations are nearly ten times more likely to give employees an opportunity to provide input into decisions that affect them than low-performing firms (38 percent for highly effective organizations and 4 percent for low-performing ones). They're nearly seven times more likely to ask employees to share suggestions on programs and changes and more than twice as likely to ask for ideas on how to get work done.

Dialogue between managers and employees has the greatest impact when it's followed by action. Although many companies in the study reported using employee surveys and internal metrics, only a few truly listen to employees and take action. Highly effective companies are nearly three times as likely to implement policy change as a result of employee opinion surveys as companies in the low-performing group (68 percent for highly effective companies and 23 percent for low-performing ones).

Public-Sector Applications

Clearly, government executives—particularly first-line managers—need to find ways to engage employees in running an agency's business, at the departmental, programmatic, and work-unit levels. Agencies such as the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) are strongly committed to using employee feedback to redesign work processes and help drive ongoing agency transformation. Others, however, need to follow suit, if they're to get the most of workers and tightly align them with their organization's missions.

One way to get employees involved in running the business is to encourage federal managers and their immediate subordinates to work in more collaborative ways to develop employee job objectives and performance metrics, a practice used widely at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in recent years. (Doing so across all federal agencies in the years ahead entails collaboration between government executives and union representatives, as 80 percent of federal workers eligible for union representation have chosen to be so represented.)

Giving employees a voice in codesigning performance metrics fosters strong job ownership and a stake in running the agency's business. Inviting employees to participate in their own appraisal process, by offering input into what is assessed and by evaluating their own job performance, sends strong signals about professionalism and shared values. It also recognizes that frontline workers have an important perspective to share about the jobs they perform and often possess the on-the-ground knowledge necessary to improve, not only their own job performance, but also discrete processes linked to their job and to overall organizational effectiveness.

Involving federal employees in the running of an agency's business is particularly critical in effectively engaging younger workers. Generations X and Y (Millenials) have both been raised in a high-technology environment, are interested in creating strong social and virtual networks, and often prefer to work in teams rather than as individuals. Thus, agencies that focus on helping these employees connect with one another around critical workplace projects, and with the mission of their organization, are likely to foster higher employee morale and enthusiasm as well as better employee retention.

"The average Millennial spends 2.8 years in a job," says Andrew Krzmarzick, a researcher on workplace trends and a training development specialist at the Graduate School, USDA. For that reason, Krzmarzick says agencies should encourage Gen Xers and Gen Yers to create strong social networks at work, using tools such as Facebook, MySpace, instant messaging, telework, and others. Although use of such tools in today's federal workplaces is still somewhat controversial (especially among baby boomer managers), they can bring employees together in virtual workplace communities, which can foster strong workplace ties, team cohesion, and loyalty to one's coworkers. "If you let people build virtual communities they may be less likely to leave an organization," says Krzmarzick.

Agencies can engage Gen X and Y workers in the running of the agency's business in other ways. The NRC, for example, emphasizes creating an informal and collegial work culture across different management and leadership levels and generations. The agency is also committed to creating as much "face time" as possible between senior agency leaders and new hires, says chief human capital officer Jim McDermott, because this is what young employees today expect and demand from their job experience. "Face time with employees is incredibly important in building social capital with people and aligning everyone in the agency around common mission goals," says McDermott. It is particularly important, he says, when managing Millennial workers because they want to feel connected to others at work. McDermott says that everyone at the NRC is involved in these efforts, from chairman Dale Klein to first-level supervisors and team leaders.

Secret 3: Help Managers Communicate Effectively
Private-Sector Findings

A third finding of the 2007/2008 Watson Wyatt Communication ROI study (closely related to the second) is that top-performing companies recognize the value of day-to-day contact between frontline managers and supervisors and employees. They work through managers and supervisors to reinforce key messages, gather employee input, and establish individual objectives that align with corporate goals. Although research shows that even highly effective companies need to do more to prepare managers for their roles as communicators, the high-performing companies in the Watson Wyatt study are far ahead of the low-performing group.

Top performers in the study "package information for easy, effective delivery, provide early access to information so that managers and supervisors have time to absorb it, and are more likely to reward managers for communicating effectively." Top performers are also far more likely to invest in training to help managers improve their communication skills.

The study found that when managers communicate effectively, employees receive clear, concise messages about corporate goals, performance, and results. Such communication reinforces priorities and direction from senior management and increases "line of sight." Employees with a clear line of sight understand how their actions roll up to influence company goals and the bottom line. Con-

sequently, they are better able to adjust their behavior and day-to-day actions for positive results.

Public-Sector Applications

Concise, consistent, and frequent communication from managers to employees is critical in creating a climate of strong organizational alignment in government agencies. It also directly bears on employee morale and motivation and can help drive and accelerate organizational transformation, a key goal of the *President's Management Agenda* and the Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF), the road map created by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management to drive the long-term transformation of the federal government.

Training managers to be effective communicators is a critical component in aligning employees and transforming organizations. The Communication ROI study found that highly effective organizations are fourteen times more likely than low-performing firms to help their managers—and, through them, their employees—"to understand, embrace, and deal openly with resistance to change." It also found the following:

✦ Eighty-nine percent of highly effective companies offer managers "formal training on helping employees deal with change" compared with only 51 percent of low-performing ones.

✦ Eighty-nine percent of highly effective companies offer managers "formal training on interpersonal communication skills" compared with only 65 percent of low-performing ones.

✦ Seventy-three percent of highly effective companies offer managers "formal training on communicating with a diverse population" compared with only 42 percent of low-performing ones.

✦ Sixty-three percent of highly effective companies offer managers "formal training on internal communication strategy and processes" compared with only 17 percent of low-performing ones.

Arming federal managers with the tools and information to be effective communicators and change leaders is essential if agencies want to achieve desired mission and program results. The need to do this well—and expeditiously—is especially acute in the defense and intelligence communities, given their constantly evolving mission priorities. Unfortunately, in many cases, "federal managers don't get necessary training in communications

or other areas," says Jerry Ice, president and CEO of the Graduate School, USDA, "More managers clearly would benefit from such training, as would their organizations."

Secret 4: Manage Change Effectively
Private-Sector Findings

Highly effective companies are more diligent and successful in engaging the communication function in their organizations to manage and plan for change. For example, they are nearly twice as likely as low-performing companies to implement effective communication initiatives to support change. These change management programs typically engage managers in very substantive ways, helping them to facilitate change and address employee concerns in times of transition.

Building a strong pool of informed managers to drive change pays big benefits. Eighty-two percent of highly effective companies report that their managers support the organization's vision through their actions and attitudes, compared with only 27 percent of low-performing companies. High-performing companies also are nine times more likely to report that managers enthusiastically implement new approaches to work (65 percent for highly effective companies and 7 percent for low-performing ones). Finally, highly effective firms are almost five times more likely to say they address the needs and concerns of the employees who remain after reorganization (72 percent for highly effective companies and 15 percent for low-performing ones).

Public-Sector Applications

Federal agencies need to focus on using their communication functions to help drive government agency transformation. They should use a variety of channels and media for this purpose, from employee town hall meetings with top-level agency officials to robust internal Web sites, focus groups, employee surveys, Web casts, and one-on-one discussions between managers and employees. Top-level leadership involvement in sending consistent messages from the top of the organization down is also clearly critical.

To help craft key change messages and cascade them throughout the organization, government executives and HC professionals must work closely together to identify the employee populations within an organization that must be targeted and reached with crucial information about change efforts and to develop and deliver change messages. Communication training for managers should focus on helping frontline employees understand how their roles relate directly to achievement of the agency's mission and how, during the course of a change initiative, the focus and nature of their jobs is likely to change.

Finally, as part of driving agency transformation, federal HC professionals should conduct focus groups that give employees a chance to articulate the key values and behaviors they believe important for all employees to demonstrate at work—if change is to be successful in the long term. Doing this affords agencies a unique opportunity to forge strong links with employees during times of critical organizational transition. It can help foster strong individual ownership of an agency's change efforts because employees feel valued and recognized if their attitudes and perspectives are taken seriously by top management and integrated into actionable, change management plans. In the long term, this also drives real and sustainable culture change in an organization because it articulates the key behaviors and attitudes necessary for transformation.

Secret 5: Measure the Impact of Employee Communication
Private-Sector Findings

Highly effective organizations do a better job of measuring the impact of employee communication than low-performing organizations. For example, they are far more likely to regularly measure the impact of communication on such business metrics as the retention of critical talent, workforce productivity, employee engagement, and business performance. The following are examples:

- ✦ Eighty-three percent of highly effective organizations measure the impact of employee communication on employee engagement compared with only 62 percent of low-performing ones.
- ✦ Fifty-six percent of highly effective organizations measure the impact of employee communication on business performance compared with only 11 percent of low-performing ones.
- ✦ Thirty-four percent of highly effective organizations measure the impact of employee communication on retention of critical talent compared with only 8 percent of low-performing ones.
- ✦ Twenty percent of highly effective organizations measure the impact of strategic business goals compared with only 4 percent of low-performing ones.

Highly effective organizations know their internal and external audiences, do their best to communicate with each

group, and use both as indicators of success. These organizations use various methods to gauge the effectiveness of internal communication efforts. Conducting focus groups to obtain both employee and manager feedback ranked higher than average in highly effective companies. These companies are nearly five times as likely as low-performing ones to hold these candid sessions with employees and more than four times as likely to hold them with managers.

Public-Sector Applications

Federal agencies should pay close attention to identifying the specific constituencies and internal stakeholder groups that need to be communicated with as part of driving organizational change, improving employee engagement, or simply executing current mission goals. Agencies need to make systematic use of data from federal HC surveys and the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings to understand employee attitudes and concerns in the workplace and to shape employee communication efforts to drive accomplishment of mission goals or broad-based agency transformation efforts.

In the public sector, where agency mission and organizational priorities can change from one administration to the next (and where competing political agendas and organizational stovepipes still abound in many agencies), putting consistent organizational emphasis on measuring the impact of employee communication—and acting on the results—may be difficult. Still, if agencies across government were to do so, it would significantly help to align their employee communication efforts to support changing agency missions and evolving agency priorities.

Secret 6: Brand the Employee Experience as a Recruiting Tool
Private-Sector Findings

Large companies invest millions in creating a brand for their products, and many are now working to create an employee experience brand as well. Their goal is to recruit, engage, and retain employees more effectively; help employees internalize company values; and gain a reputation as an employer of choice by conveying a consistent and coherent picture of what working for them means.

Branding the employee experience encompasses three primary activities:

✦ Integrating employee programs and policies with organizational culture and business strategies

✦ Examining all aspects of the "employee deal" throughout the employment life cycle
✦ Building employee loyalty to a company the same way a consumer brand builds loyalty to a product.

Employment branding involves communicating all the dimensions of the employee deal to employees, prospective employees, and other significant stakeholders. It links the employment deal with employee aspirations and business goals and encompasses language, messages, positioning, graphics, packaging, and media. It addresses former, current, and future employees as well as stakeholders such as external recruiters.

The number of survey respondents who say their organization has a clear employer brand has risen slightly since the 2003/2004 study. Today, 55 percent of highly effective organizations report having a "clear employer brand" compared with just 18 percent of low-performing organizations.

Public-Sector Applications

In the spring 2008 issue of *The Public Manager* ("Recruiting the Generations to Federal Service"), I noted the importance of federal agencies' building strong agency brands. In today's competitive job market, it's vital that federal agencies invest time in branding themselves if they hope to attract a new generation to public service and differentiate themselves from other prospective private- and public-sector employers. Yet, this is something many government agencies have hesitated to do.

One of the most important things agencies can do to brand themselves effectively is to establish strong entry programs that quickly socialize and integrate new hires into an agency and create strong bonds between those new employees and their organization. Research conducted by PPS, however, shows that the federal government has no consistent approach to onboarding and that onboarding activities in individual agencies often lack a focus on the mission, vision, and goals of the organization (see box).

"Onboarding is an undervalued and often overlooked component in building strong employee performance and loyalty to organizations," notes Jonathan Kapplear, associate manager for research at PPS and project manager on a recently completed report on federal onboarding, *Getting On Board*. When done correctly, Kapplear says onboarding "improves employee performance, increases employee engagement, improves retention and accelerates a new hire's time to productivity on the job."

Another thing agencies can do to help brand the employee experience for newly hired Gen Yers is to provide them mentoring and career coaching from the moment they walk in the door. Activities such as these help "customize" the employee work experience. "Gen Yers like workplace interaction and if their boss is willing to mentor them, help them find their way around the organization, and take time to understand their long-term career goals, it can be a great way to build employee loyalty," says Brad Golson, associate manager on the Education and Outreach Team at PPS, who works with some seventy federal agencies to help them recruit effectively on six hundred college campuses. Golson adds that federal managers should also send the bios of new hires around to all members of that person's new work team before their first day on the job. Managers should also look for ways to leverage the technological prowess of Gen Yers to solve business problems and improve office communications, he says.

"Doing things like this are great ways to acknowledge new hires when they start in a government job. They're also smart strategies to use to retain and engage today's young people in the federal workplace."

Conclusions

This article outlines some communication best practices used by high-performing companies today, ones that have a direct and positive bearing on organizational performance. By extension, these practices have significant value in a public-sector context, helping to align public-sector employees behind agency mission goals, drive improved organizational performance, assist managers in engaging employees, and create the conditions necessary to retain high-value federal employees over the long term.

As government agencies endeavor to comply with the requirements of HCAAF (and with future performance and accountability requirements likely to be laid down by the next administration), these communication best practices will be critical, not only in boosting employee alignment and work productivity, but in enhancing organizational agility and driving successful agency transformation.

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