REAL-LIFE, REAL-TIME COMMUNICA

More than a function, it's the central nervous system of your organization

by Les Landes

L et's face it. In today's complex, fast-paced organizations, communication is just too important to be left in the hands of communication professionals. Communication is not a function anymore—if it ever were. It's the central nervous system of the organization, and the ones that perform best are those that successfully link everyone into a real-time, interactive network for sharing information and knowledge.

Take a look at what is happening with knowledge management—one of the hottest communication crazes to grip the corporate world in recent years. As with many fads from the past, the premise underlying knowledge management is highly relevant. We do need more robust systems to ensure the optimal sharing of data, information and knowledge in organizations. Problem is, the message is getting lost in the spectacle and "programitis" that often accompany the typical management movement. As a result, the imperative for better knowl-edge sharing is not being translated into basic operating systems that can get woven into the elemental fabric of most organizations. In the end, knowl-edge management will surely wind up as bleached bones in the desert of man-agement movements that have come and crumbled along the way.

STARING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE FACE

What does it take to make the switch from program to process, from specta-cle to system? In the case of communi-cation, it mainly takes a *reality* check. Does it work in *real* time—or does the "news" arrive two months after every-one already knows the "real" facts? Does it convey *real* information and knowledge—or is it some contrived and often meaningless version of the truth that has been sanitized or glam-orized through the word-smithing of professional communicators at the behest of senior management?

If we want well-informed people, working in high-trust relationships in our organizations, we need to stare that need for reality in the face and determine what it means for organiza-tional communication. For starters, it means that those responsible for internal communication need to make a basic shift away from being media and message mongers toward serving as facilitators of the communication process for which everyone is respon-sible and in which everyone plays a vital role.

What does that look like in the real world? First and foremost, we have to stop thinking about commu-nication as media and messages and start thinking about it as systems and relationships. What does a *real* com-munication system look like? Among the essential characteristics:

- Interaction
- Availability and access
- Speed
- Relevance
- Inclusion

Here are some important considera-tions about each of those characteristics.

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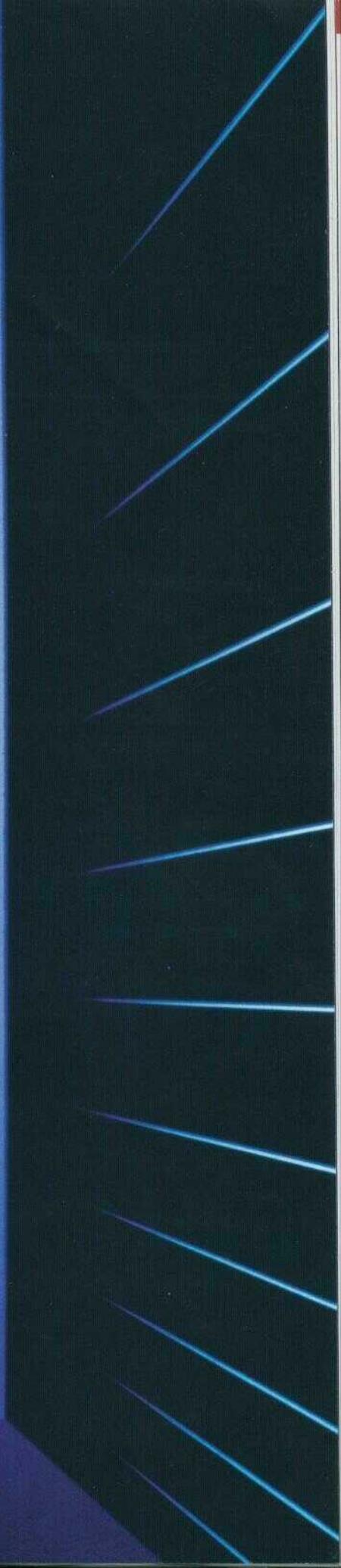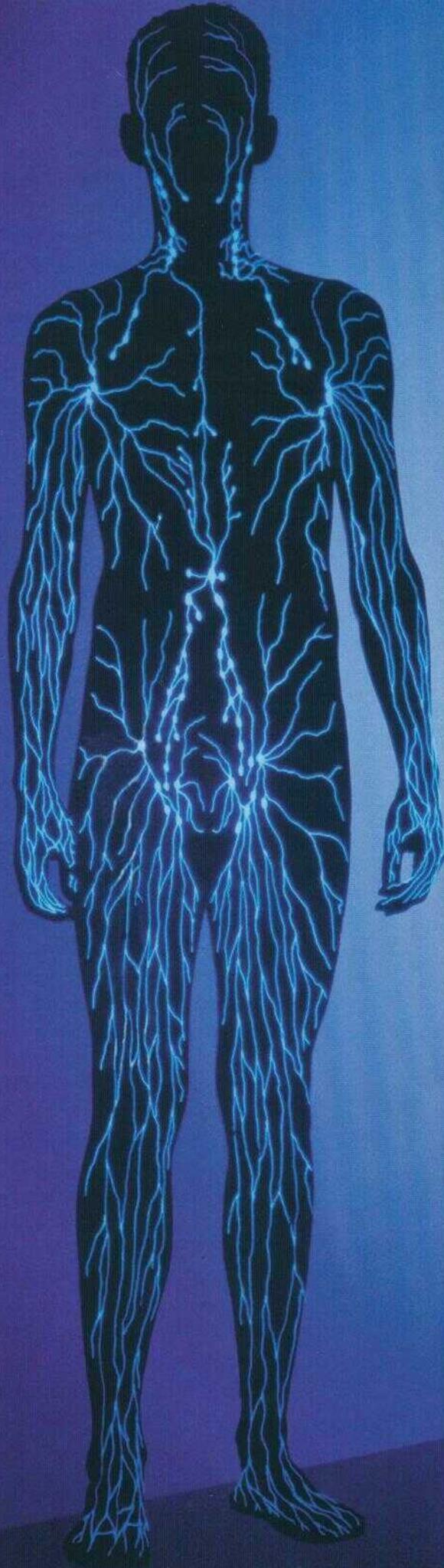
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INTERACTION

We have all heard people grumble that the communication in their organization isn't a two-way street—it's all top down. It is easy to sympathize with the intent of their complaint, but it misses a very basic point. If it's one-way, it's not *real* communication. It is nothing more than message distribution. Even some communication professionals miss that pertinent fact. Those communicators tend to define their roles by the messages they put out and the media they use rather than the relationships that communication must facilitate.

If you want to know whether or not someone is a message-maker or a communicator, here is a quick tip-off. In his speaking or in his writing, does he follow the verb "communicate" with the preposition "to?" If so, it's a good sign that he just doesn't get it. People like that see their role as information providers, which is only half the process.

Real communicators believe that the only prepositions that should follow the word "communicate" are "with" and "about." *Real* communication is an interactive process, not a directive or distributive one. If the goal is "common" understanding, messages must flow back and forth in a continuous *exchange*, not the straight line that you get from traditional communication tools such as newsletters, magazines and management memos.

AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS

Many people use the words "availability" and "access" interchangeably. Both are essential in a useful communication system, but they are substantially different. Availability is a matter of *policy*, and if you want to foster trust, the key to that policy has to be "no secrets." Access is a matter of *process*, and if you want to foster trust, the key to that process has to be "no barriers." An organization may have a policy that all information is open and available. But that does people little good if they can't get access to it—either because it's buried somewhere that is impossible to reach, or they can't process it because they have no context for the information, can't understand it or are drowning from information overload.

SPEED

We've all heard the old saying "time is money." Speed counts big time when it comes to a quality communication system. The best time for information is "*real* time," not weeks, days or even hours later. As soon as the information is in a form that is credible and able to be processed, it should be available and accessible to everyone. That doesn't mean you share all information with everyone all at once. That's just dumping, not communication. But whether you're talking about getting people information that will improve their knowledge and performance as quickly as possible or you are simply trying to outrun the grapevine, the faster the communication, the better.

Organizations have been struggling with the speed challenge for decades. Most know it's important, but they have been strangled by their own policies and systems—painfully slow methods that get the corporate version of the facts to people at a snail's pace delivered in a package that is much too slick and controlled to be credible. You want to know what employees feel about information sharing in your organization? It's pretty simple: "Get it to me now—in real time—without sanitizing or glamorizing it. Then we can get down to some *real* business."

RELEVANCE

Organizational communication often misses the mark simply because it doesn't have much bearing on the

day-to-day work lives of most employees. Its relevance is more *contextual* than *operational*. Stories in newsletters, for example, may offer deeper insight and perspective on decision, direction and actions. But they often lack a sense of urgency, impact and connection for the average worker.

To be relevant, communication must be linked cogently to organizational goals and individual employee objectives. It must help workers make better daily decisions on the job—like quantitative feedback on the effectiveness of internal and external supply chains. It must provide the *real* information that people need to do their jobs more effectively—like up-to-date customer satisfaction data. It must direct employees quickly and clearly to immediate corrective action when performance veers off course—like instantaneous product or service quality data. It must provide a potent mechanism for engaging employees in systematic continuous improvement—such as "implemented idea systems" that replace sterile, archaic suggestion programs.

The basic message is unmistakable. Operational relevance is essential if communication is going to engage people's hearts and minds—and make a *real* difference on the bottom line.

INCLUSION

Leaving someone out of the communication loop is like cutting off the blood supply to part of the body. It withers and dies. Of course, no organization would admit it ever does something like that. The typical answer from management is that people get the information they *need*, not what they *want*. That kind of management arrogance is largely responsi-

ble for the crisis in trust that exists in many organizations today. Sure, people can get by on a need-to-know basis, but what is the lost opportunity cost and damage to working relationships that result from keeping people in the dark?

One way to understand and appreciate the basic secret to *real* communication is to think about your organization as a living, biological organism—as a human body. If all the information were going one way—from the brain out, let's say—how would the body know when to react to external stimuli? Your foot could be screaming, "I'm stuck in the door." But if you don't have a path and a process to get that message back up to the brain, you get no response. Likewise, if all or any part of the body is being overloaded with more information than it can process, the whole system goes into shock and shuts down—just like an electrical circuit.

As for speed, we should think about how most organizations operate. If someone in your organization figuratively "put her hand on a hot stove," how long would it take for the information to get to the brain, then back down to the hand with the instruction to remove it? If your organization is like most, the hand would be burnt to a crisp before the information made the rounds.

The options are clear. Keep applying the old programmatic "media and messages" mode of communication that perpetuates non-interactive information distribution, or shift to a systemic "relationship-driven" approach that keeps everything and everyone in continuous alignment. Now ask yourself, is there much of a choice...*really*?

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