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"Measuring What Matters"

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Part One

Measuring the value and effectiveness of communication has always been a challenging goal for organizations. Since the mid-1980s and the emergence of the quality movement, it has become something of an obsession. To some degree, that fixation has been driven by communication professionals who historically have felt under-appreciated and sometimes threatened by the continuing trend toward down-sizing and outsourcing in recent years.

While the emphasis on measurement is legitimate and understandable, organizational communicators might find themselves better served if they take a somewhat different slant on the issue. Instead of focusing solely on measuring the value of communications, they should consider shifting greater attention toward communicating about measures that people value.

A small St. Louis-based company that won the Baldrige National Quality Award in 1994 offers a compelling illustration of how one organization applied that principle with considerable effectiveness. The company's name is Wainwright Industries, and when they set their sites on the prestigious award, they knew that accomplishing such a lofty goal would require an extraordinary data gathering effort. Once they put that data together, however, they were faced with the challenge of how to share it systematically throughout the organization. That challenge was – in a word – communication.

They eventually came up with a solution inspired by NASA. The Wainwright team decided to post all of the data in a single room organized according to priorities that were established through input from all employees in the company. They called that room "Mission Control," and its purpose was to enable all employees to know how various aspects of the company's performance were tracking at all times. They set goals and benchmarks for each metric, and using color coded flags, the display provided instant recognition of emerging problem areas. What's more, it activated a pre-set course of action if performance indicators fell below established benchmarks. In short, it was a dynamic system for exchanging information and taking action that reflected the company's driving philosophy that "communication is everything."

Given the orientation that many organizational communicators have toward traditional media and messages, that type of "data and information center" would not likely be viewed as a natural responsibility of the communications department. In part, that is because historically they have seen themselves serving more of a functional role than an operational one. That type of approach tends to foster more of a tactical focus on messages and media than a strategic focus on the broader requirements of a comprehensive, organization-wide communication system. Therein lies the proverbial rub – as well as the opportunity to be more relevant.

When communicators measure their success mainly in terms of functional indicators like media impressions, newsletter satisfaction ratings and similar measures, they limit the scope of their potential impact. While those indicators offer a convenient tool for tallying departmental performance, they are not highly relevant to the operational performance that matters most to people in the organization.

Getting a handle on that distinction starts by understanding that an organization is essentially a set of working relationships, and communication is the glue that bonds them together. The quality of that glue is what determines how well people stick together in doing their day-to-day work. Ultimately, the most vital bonding function of organizational communications should be to facilitate the exchange of data, information, and knowledge that support the collective efforts of employees to do their everyday jobs well and make the organization a successful, secure place to work. That is what most people care about

– and that is where communicators should look for cues in defining the measure and merit of their own roles and responsibilities.

In next month's issue of the IABC newsletter, Part Two of this story will provide direction on defining operational "measures that matter" – as well as the characteristics that must be built into the design of a comprehensive measurement and communication system.

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