

# Building your influence - how your team can have more clout

Communication teams need to understand the business and help build an internal communications culture or face never having a seat at the table, writes Paul Matthews, from The CommsCoach.

A communication culture fast-tracks change, growth and better outcomes. By focusing the business and leaders on communication, as a way of doing better business, organisations yield better results. Where organisations have succeeded in embedding communication in their culture they have better outcomes in safety, innovation, change, cultural alignment and of course employee engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Where communication is not embedded, businesses rely on communication teams or communication osmosis to reinforce strategy and culture. The osmosis approach is unreliable as organisational commitment and leader capability to communicate always varies.

A lack of commitment to communicate costs a business more. Safety incidents, errors and customer dissatisfaction are clear examples resulting from misalignment with strategy, caused by poor communication or failure of leaders to listen.<sup>2</sup>

Leaders and teams that prioritise communication deliver better outcomes.<sup>3</sup> This makes sense, so why don't all organisations adopt this approach across the board? Communication is not often seen as a priority because it is seen as part of "roll out"... put at the end of the line. I say communication leaders need to be at the table, from the start, as part of the decision-making process.

### Get a seat at the table

Working for an Australian business, striving for greater safety, productivity and customer satisfaction, I delivered a communication capability plan to boost leadership focus on communication

“  
**Leaders and teams  
that prioritise  
communication deliver  
better outcomes.**  
”

and create a culture of communication in their operations.

They faced major public scrutiny and had to achieve significant adoption of change and automation to survive. They were fearful of public backlash, union protest and customer upset. All of which needed effective communication planning and competence beyond the responsibility of the comms team. Leader communication was the lynchpin of success in a highly unionised and remote workforce.

The approach placed communication leaders on steering groups and project teams. They were influential in decision making. This put us at the start of the process and embedded communication in the strategic decisions. We were at the table from the start.

We used data, evidence and influence to demonstrate the importance of communication in engaging stakeholders, building culture and delivering on the big outcomes. Communication was positioned as a key enabler of success, recognised as being

<sup>1</sup><https://www.cjku.net/en/dossier/how-communication-drives-organizational-performance-innovation-safety-and-operational-improvements/1253>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.rmfi.harvard.edu/About-CRICO/Media/Press-Releases/News/2016/February/Failures-in-Communication-Contribute-to-Medical-Malpractice>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.cjku.net/en/dossier/how-leaders-can-increase-organizational-performance-improving-communication/1257>

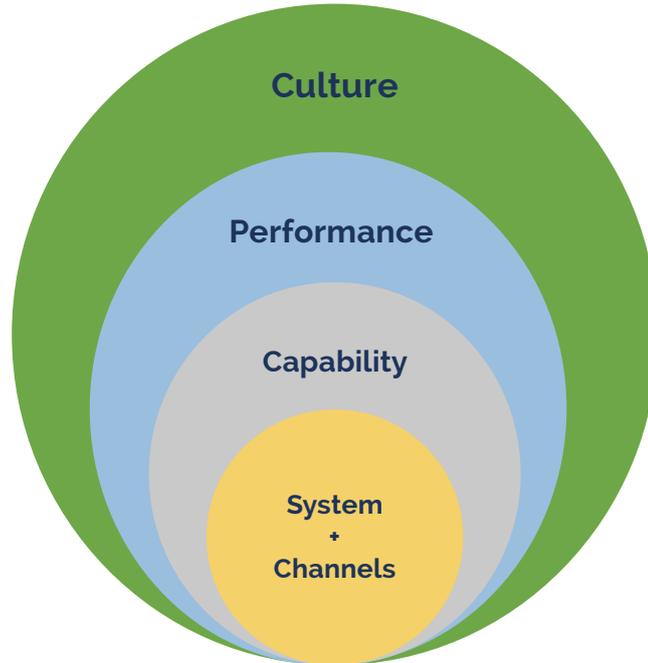
able to enlist meaningful stakeholder engagement, not deliver traditional one way messaging. Leaders appreciated that communication was beneficial in advancing their goals.

By focusing the executive and middle management on effective communication, the outcomes were positive and sustainable: customer satisfaction increased, union resistance was minimised, and employee engagement increased. Employee engagement raised. A communication culture emerged in a newly automated business needing strong leader-employee relations.

### **Building a communication culture**

In my experience, organisations that have made communication a part of their culture share some common traits. They see the importance of investment in communication capability as part of their overall strategy. This has come from the communication team influencing and demonstrating the importance of communication as an enabler of change and results.

## **A CULTURE OF COMMUNICATION**



**Developed by CommsCoach.org**

## TRAITS OF A COMMUNICATION CULTURE

### Systems and channels

- Effective systems to enable one and two-way communication internally and externally
- Corporate channels based on the needs of the business
- Relevant policies and procedures that enable communication, not block it
- A dedicated and skilled communication team

### Capability

- Commitment to build the will and skill of leaders and teams to communicate (e.g. manager communication capability enhancement, activating SMEs as thought leaders internally and externally)
- Proactively listening to stakeholders

### Performance

- Continuously monitoring communication effectiveness
- Seeking feedback to drive improvement beyond routine engagement surveys
- Leaders recognise that communication is part of their role

### Culture

- Communication is embedded in day to day operations
- Communication is invested in and seen as an enabler of success
- The business listens and acts on customer and employee insights
- Leaders value communication advice and counsel

## The communication team as enabler of success

The communication team role is obviously critical to driving a culture of communication. The positioning of the team sets the scene for change. Strong leadership in the team will likely see movement towards a communication culture with emphasis on better communication adoption and delivery.

Commitment and energy alone are not enough. The team needs to position itself as enablers of communication, not blockers or controllers. This requires an enabling mindset and strategy, effective positioning and team capability to enlist leader support.

Communicators need to gain a mandate to influence corporate decisions. The relationship and advisory role with executive team members is a fundamental ingredient to this change, as well as the correct focus within the communication team.



## Focus to increase communications teams' influence

FOCUS	ACTIONS
<b>Understand the business</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn and analyse the needs of the business</li> <li>• Monitor success of channels and activities and review regularly</li> </ul> <p>(Remember: If you don't understand the business or leaders' priorities, then you can't advise them).</p>
<b>Build strong relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align to organisational protagonists and priorities</li> <li>• Use data and evidence to drive and influence decision making</li> <li>• Engage with key stakeholders and audiences regularly.</li> </ul>
<b>Align to the business strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a communication strategy that supports delivery of the business strategy</li> <li>• Ensure team relevance and impact on the things that matter</li> <li>• Align with the business planning timeline</li> <li>• Focus on high and medium priorities; let go of low level work</li> </ul>
<b>Focus on outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enable dialogue that creates value to the business (insights, data, feedback, connections)</li> <li>• Be clear on what and how the comms team contributes to big picture results</li> <li>• Proactively demonstrate the value that communicating adds at each level, using your results, data and influence</li> </ul>

Communication teams need to demonstrate they are at least as adept at corporate planning and strategy implementation as other departments. If we can't do this, then we risk always being at the end of the line, not at the table where we belong.



### **Biography:** Paul Matthews

Paul Matthews has been building communication teams and helping businesses communicate for over 20 years.

Based in Australia, Paul helps leaders and business prioritise communication and build leader capability for better business outcomes.

[www.commscoach.org](http://www.commscoach.org)