

Want to get on in internal communications? Learn to play the PIANO.

Sue Dewhurst and Liam FitzPatrick argue it all comes down to understanding your sources of influence and drawing up your own inventory.

A few years ago we helped develop the Inter-Comm Matrix of skills for internal communicators. With friends from a variety of different professional bodies we set out to define the competencies which people needed at different stages of their careers.

Although the model is still a good guide to help you plan your training or select new team members, it has never really answered some nagging questions at the back of our minds.

Why are some senior internal communicators so much more successful than their peers with identical backgrounds? How come some people with relatively little professional know-how seem to be more effective than better qualified managers? And why are internal communications chat rooms full of people asking “what can I do to get my senior colleagues to take internal communications seriously?”.

Over the last few years we have been discussing the issue with colleagues from around the world as well as looking at recent writings on the subject and two significant themes seem to stand out.

Firstly, successful senior communicators rarely talk about power. They enjoy their position by virtue of their personal influence – stamping your feet is acknowledged as quick route to unemployment.

Secondly, being effective boils down to a mix of attributes which are often summarised as “being influential”. And when you look closer, you see the same items being mentioned time and again.

We have attempted to draw together the features which are most commonly mentioned as the building blocks used by successful senior communicators.

Clearly, there are few if any real paragons. We all have areas of real strength and areas we need to develop. And there seems to be a situational element – high performers in one place can struggle and stumble when they move jobs or when a new senior team arrives.

However, the PIANO model provides the basis for development conversations with your manager or, if you can find one, professional coach.

Personal Skills – can I communicate?

We often spend so much time worrying about the performance of managers around us that IC professionals can sometimes neglect their own development when it comes to internal communications. Sometimes backgrounds in fields such as journalism or event management can actually produce IC leaders with a limited repertoire of skills when it comes to choosing the right moment to be assertive or collaborative.

And where communicators seem to come unstuck most often is an inability to handle the inevitable frustrations of operating at the highest levels in their organisation.

However, this is also one of the areas where HR departments offer a great deal of practical advice and support. There are many excellent tools to help you think about your skills and a good professional coach will certainly be an enormous help if you need it.

Information – do people need to ask me?

Strong internal communication leaders tend to be a major port of call for information about the organisation. They don't compete with the HR data base but are often able to provide detailed information about segments, attitudes and recent changes in a way that no one else does.

They also have excellent internal intelligence systems – they lead teams that listen to what is happening around the place. They turn up at every party or retirement presentation and are represented in charity events and discussion groups. Senior managers come to depend on their candid and agenda-free reporting of attitudes.

Relatively few IC leaders are responsible for the employee survey, but they often have sophisticated methods for interpreting data. And they make sure that their team includes research skills such as focus group facilitation.

Importantly, they are also the first stop for a manager wanting user-friendly explanations of business strategy, performance or plans. Because they understand the business they are able to commission simple boilerplate presentations and fact sheets and have sensible advice to give senior management on that last-minute PowerPoint.

Ability and know-how – can I be relied upon for the basics?

Some of the best internal communicators never appear on conference platforms talking about their clever new technique for changing culture or for linking their newsletter to saving their business and solving world hunger.

Instead they focus on getting the basics right.

One friend of ours talks about discussing strategic issues with his CEO. But he says that the moment he lets the CEO present a PowerPoint full of typos or forgets to check that the microphones work, is the day he starts to lose influence. It all comes down to taking care of the little things.

Another senior friend stresses the need to find things to deliver and deliver visibly. Her advice to people taking up new roles is to find something small that matters to a senior manager and make it happen. It may well be something seemingly trivial, like an email newsletter or a town hall. But getting a reputation for dependable competence is essential.

Network – how well do I know the movers and shakers?

All senior managers – regardless of their discipline – are notable for their personal networks. Internal Communicators, in fact, probably need to be better than most.

Having senior friends who will explain technical issues, knowing alternative routes to influence the CEO or just having a shoulder to cry upon make all the difference. But perhaps it's most importantly to have access to people who are happy to chew the fat with you and develop ideas.

PIANO - The communicator's inventory of influence

Internal communicators have the potential to be enormously influential in their organisation. Assess yourself by asking the following 12 questions:

Personal skills

- Am I able to switch between a range of personal communications styles when I need to
- Do senior colleagues treat me as a peer and value my opinions?

Information

- Am I an acknowledged expert on our people, how they can be segmented and what they are thinking?
- Do the most senior people trust the quality of informal intelligence that I can provide?

Ability and know-how

- Do I have the right technical skills?
- Am I the acknowledged expert on good practice in communications ?
- Do I have an 'elevator pitch' that says how I add value to our organisation?

Network

- How well developed is my network of senior managers?
- Do I have enough senior friends who can help solve my problems?

Official Status

- Do I have the right formal position in order to do my job?
- Does it matter really – is access more important than title around here?

A good start is to draw up a list on the most important senior managers in your organisation and see which ones you could call in on unannounced. And if there is someone you hardly know how are you going to work with them?

Official Status – Does the job title matter?

You'd like to pretend it doesn't matter wouldn't you? But you'd hate to give up the salary and perks that go with it!

The truth is that where you sit and what you are called does make a difference and you have to decide what is right for you and your organisation. However, it only matters if it makes a difference to the access you enjoy w

In some organisations getting your first meeting with the CEO may depend on the number of stripes on your sleeve or whether you're based in the right department. However, whether they invite you back will depend on your performance – a chief executive won't see you out of a sense of obligation!

Your official position can make a difference when it comes to persuading strangers to help you. So, the question to ask is whether you are in the right place.