



Innovative Methods to Strengthen KYTC Internal Communications

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Kentucky Transportation Center
College of Engineering, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky

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Commonwealth of Kentucky

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Research Report
KTC-24-06

Innovative Methods to Strengthen Internal KYTC Communications

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16. Abstract Communication is the linchpin of every organization. Poor communication leads to inefficiencies, frustration among staff, and employee disaffection and disengagement. Although some state transportation agencies have adopted comprehensive strategic plans for internal communications, many have taken a more piecemeal approach, with some Offices and units (e.g., incident management) developing their own plans that apply only to their operations. The latter approach is less than ideal because establishing a comprehensive communications plan provides an organizing framework for all communications within an organization and is critical for uniting staff around a shared sense of purpose and equipping them with the tools they need to realize the organization's mission and vision. Crafting a solid communications plan also helps to clarify responsibilities, map information flows, break down informational and disciplinary silos, and strengthen employee engagement. If the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) were to embark on the development of a strategic plan for internal communications, it would benefit from adopting several best practices: (1) treating communication as a core competency, (2) improving mentorship opportunities, (3) minimizing clutter by eliminating information redundancies and cutting extraneous content from messages, and (4) seizing opportunities to build employee engagement throughout the agency. As a precursor to developing the communications plan, the Cabinet would benefit from conducting a thorough communications audit to identify communication strengths and weaknesses and identify performance metrics to measure the effectiveness of communications. If a plan was formally adopted, KYTC staff would need to devise a communications toolbox that contains strategies and tactics for increasing engagement and streamlining information flows. Regular performance assessments can be used to identify when and how the communications plan and toolkit should be updated.			
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Executive Summary

Sound internal communications strategies are an essential ingredient for building and maintaining efficient, high-performing organizations and government agencies. But too often agencies do not give internal communications the attention they deserve, or it is simply assumed that everyone in an organization can communicate succinctly and effectively. If the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) develops a strategic plan for internal communications, the agency would benefit from taking a proactive approach to communications planning as it confers many benefits, such as uniting employees around a shared vision and common purpose, increasing staff engagement, reducing turnover, boosting productivity, promoting collaboration, forging mutual trust, and clarifying responsibilities. Four best practices KYTC can use to strengthen internal communication are described below.

- **Treat Communication as a Core Competency**

- Training employees to communicate effectively can improve organizational efficiency. All new KYTC staff would benefit from training in core communications skills during their onboarding processes, while veteran employees and leadership would benefit from trainings in communication and leadership skills.

- **Enhance Mentoring Opportunities to Bridge Knowledge Gaps**

- Knowledge gaps between new and experienced employees persist. Veteran staff understand that change happens quickly within KYTC and need to make sure new staff keep pace with changes and learn to recognize them in real time. Establishing mentoring programs offers a structured approach that will benefit newer staff.

- **Keep Information in One Place to Minimize Clutter**

- Information clutter proliferates, especially when staff receive redundant information through multiple sources. Two methods of reducing clutter overload are to use a primary channel of message delivery and to place all information in a central location. Individual messages should have clean, uncluttered layouts so they clearly convey information to recipients.

- **Create Opportunities to Build KYTC's Culture and Improve Engagement**

- Because KYTC workers are spread across the state, many may not feel a strong sense of culture or connectedness to one another or the rest of the organization (e.g., other Districts or Central Office). The Cabinet would benefit from conducting an internal communications assessment that dives into employee views of the agency's culture and provides direction for deepening their sense of belonging and bolstering engagement.

Developing a strategic plan for internal communications should follow a three-step process, beginning with an agencywide communications audit and ending with the development of a communications toolkit that equips all staff with the knowledge and practices.

1. Conduct a Communications Audit

A communications audit is a starting point for developing an overarching strategic plan for internal communications. The term "audit" may evoke a negative connotation, but it is simply a formal process to monitor and evaluate organizational communications. This assessment would investigate communication functions and policies, with an emphasis on processes, systems, and people. Audit results can be used to identify areas for improvement and establish benchmarks for key performance indicators.

2. Develop a Communications Plan

The audit results should be used to develop an internal communications plan that aligns with the agency’s mission and vision. Strategies and tactics should be designed to build more robust communications systems that will positively impact employee knowledge, engagement, and behaviors.

3. Build a Communications Toolkit

Once an internal communications plan is in place communications stakeholders should develop a communications toolkit that consists of a mix of tactics which build employee engagement. The toolbox needs to be updated based on the analysis of performance data and in response to the proliferation of new technologies.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Well-run government agencies grasp the importance of internal and public-facing communications that are efficient, clear, and streamlined. Having sound internal organizational communication processes — which includes clearly defining communication audiences, channels, and messages, and establishing an internal process for updating policy documents and organizational processes (i.e., a policy system) — is critical for agencies to operate effectively, pursue strategic goals, and fulfill mandates.

Although the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) has a strategic plan that defines the agency’s mission, vision, values, and goals, it lacks a formal agencywide internal communications plan. An overarching communications plan would convey the organization’s mission, vision, and goals to stakeholders at all levels of the agency and forge strong, respectful relationships between all staff. To prepare for the development of an internal communications strategy, KYTC leadership asked Kentucky Transportation Center (KTC) researchers to identify and describe best practices for internal agency communications.

Table 1.1 Report Contents

Chapter	Content
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defines internal communications and describes its function in state transportation agencies (STAs)• Reviews literature on communication models and the relationship between leadership and organizational communication• Summarizes the benefits and challenges of effective internal communications
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reviews best practices for internal communications
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Suggests opportunities for KYTC to implement internal communications best practices

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Background

Gallup (2023) concluded that just 34% of U.S. employees are engaged at work. That is, they feel involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace. But 51% are not engaged and just maintain a status quo, and another 16% are actively disengaged. Only 33% of employees strongly agree that the mission or purpose of their company makes them feel their job is important, believe that their opinions count at work, and think that someone at work encourages their professional development. While 34% strongly agree they have opportunities at work to learn and grow, just 20% are extremely satisfied with their company as a place to work. The news is sunnier at what Gallup describes as the world's best organizations, where employee engagement approaches 70%. This illustrates that a commitment to building a strong workplace culture and investing in employees through open communication is what distinguishes best-in-class organizations from their less effective counterparts.

Effective communications strategies are vital to organizational success and optimal performance but crafting them is challenging for most organizations. Axios HQ (2022) reported that “there is a fundamental issue inside every organization — every institution, agency, nonprofit, team. Whether they know it or not, research shows most are struggling with the same internal issue: communication.”

Despite understanding that internal communications are critical, many organizations devote few resources to improving them (Kalla, 2005). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Chief Communications Officers (COOs) routinely find that they have more work but fewer resources (Raywood and Butcher, 2021). Communication is rarely viewed as a core competency. Typically, it is assumed that leaders and employees know how to communicate despite not receiving communications-specific training (Oliver, 1997; Kalla, 2005).

According to AASHTO (2017), STAs sometimes treat internal communications as an afterthought. Despite having detailed communications plans for handling crises that describe proper information flows and what actions need to be taken, most agencies lack a communications plan that addresses routine, daily operations.

A few STAs use strategic communication plans that provide guidance on communicating with the public and media relations. The Washington State DOT's (WSDOT)¹ *Communications Manual* details the organization's philosophy, including brand, planning, inclusion, and communication channels. It focuses on external audiences, establishes communication standards for the agency brand, and lays out steps for how to develop and implement internal communications plans. The manual also includes an online style guide for agency communications (KYTC has a style guide for branding as well). Forninash (2019) identified strategic communications best practices for transit agency projects in the U.S. and Canada and developed a toolkit to guide decision making. The toolkit defines the efficacy of communication methods, identifies challenges and success factors, and gives project examples that can be adapted to fit agency needs.

Many STA traffic and incident management units issue communications plans. The Cabinet's Division of Incident Management has a formal communications plan that captures how information flows between internal and external stakeholders. That plan identifies who receives information, how they should be contacted, and the decision criteria for contacting the FHWA, Federal Motor Carriers Administration (FMCSA), and KYTC's Office of Public Affairs.

¹ <https://www.wsdot.wa.gov/publications/manuals/fulltext/M3030/Communications.pdf?may-2021>

Because sound communication is integral to project management, several STAs have developed communications plans specific to this area (e.g., Colorado,² New Hampshire³, Montana⁴). The New Hampshire and Montana DOTs incorporate a communications matrix into project management plans that shows who receives what deliverables and when.

2.2 Defining Internal Communications

The term *internal communications* can be defined broadly or narrowly. Kalla (2005) proposed a broad definition: “all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization.” Yeomans (2006) offered a narrower definition: “the planned use of communication actions to systematically influence the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of current employees.” The broad definition views organizations as multi-level systems (Lee and Dong, 2023) where both vertical and horizontal communication processes are common. The narrower definition focuses on the interconnected relationships between organizations, work experiences, and employees’ attitudes and motivations.

Other definitions describe employees as *internal publics* or *internal stakeholders* that are increasingly treated like consumers of a workplace brand, especially as technology blurs the boundaries between internal and external publics (Welch and Jackson, 2007; Berry, 1981; Men and Bowen, 2017).

Combining definitions, internal communications can be described as a process for aligning communication strategies with organizational needs and employee needs. It puts the organization’s mission, vision, and goals into practice and unites employees around a common goal.

2.3 The Function and Purpose of Internal Communications

Strategic management and internal communications are entwined (Strategic Direction, 2022). Some researchers use the term *strategic internal communications* or *strategic internal communications management* to describe how internal communications function within an organization.

A *strategy* “guides the structuring and tactical operations of the organization” (Porter, 1996; Downs and Adrian, 2004) and sets the direction or approach to reach objectives (Jones, 2018). Tactics are methods used to deliver messages aligned with organizational objectives through communication channels to specific audiences based on specific strategies or plans. Tactics enact strategies through a variety of activities.

Internal communications facilitate the pursuit of organizational goals by strategically managing relationships between internal stakeholders. Communications are used to get internal stakeholder buy-in and unite employees at all levels around a shared purpose. Through tactics-driven internal communications, organizations inform employees about their job, the organization, and environment (Men and Bowen, 2017); facilitate decision making, socialization, [and] the inculcation of values (Berger, 2008; Men and Bowen, 2017); and influence knowledge, engagement, and attitudes.

² <https://www.codot.gov/business/project-management/scoping/project-communications>

³ <https://www.nh.gov/dot/org/operations/highwaymaintenance/documents/EIP-8-Form8aCommunicationPlanMatrix031315.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/business/engops/project-doc.aspx>

Evolving Methods of Communication

While some fundamental principles of internal or employee communications have remained largely unchanged over the past decade, the functions of internal communications are evolving due to technological changes, internal and external culture changes, and the changing workforce composition. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed how businesses and organizations run, with internal communications practitioners adopting innovative tactics to reach employees in new, unprecedented ways.

The boundaries of internal and external communications (public) are blurring. With internal groups now regarded as part of a general audience, messages directed to an external audience are an “integral part to the organization’s operating discourse” (Cheney and Christensen, 2011, p. 2). Organizations have begun “consumerizing the employee experience” (FWI and Poppulo, 2021, p. 15) because staff expect to be treated as if they were a customer, one who demands courteous and timely responses.

Relationship Building

Internal communications help build a strong, purposeful culture among employees, instilling in them a shared work identity, values, and beliefs (Men and Bowen, 2017). Strong organizational-employee relationships build trust and community. Many social, psychological, and environmental factors influence how people communicate with one another. That communication, in-turn, shapes an individual’s work identity that connects their sense of self to their job and employer.

Message Distribution

Organizations use knowledge of strategic communication to design and distribute messages to stakeholders which are intended to meet organizational goals (LaBelle and Waldrek, 2020). Communications involve top-down (leadership to employees), bottom-up (employees providing feedback back to supervisors and leadership), and horizontal (informal peer-to-peer) networks. According to Berger (2011) employee/internal communications has three dimensions:

- Formal communications that are planned and originate from communication professionals (e.g., newsletters, internal blogs)
- Horizontal communications that occur within, among, and across work groups and teams
- Non-verbal communications and behaviors from individuals.

2.4 Locating Internal Communications in an Organization

Cross-Functional Discipline

Internal Communications is a cross-functional discipline (Kalla, 2005) that historically has been housed in human resources, corporate communication/public relations, marketing, or IT departments. A separate communications group, however, can integrate efforts across these areas. It touches every part of an organization so alignment across departments and locations facilitates success. The function can be in-house or externally located. In-house lets the communicators have an ear close to the ground, while external groups are removed from potential organizational politics.

The Role of Internal Communications in STAs

STAs house communications professionals in different organizational units (AASHTO, 2017). Some STAs create an organizational chart that defines communication roles. One example is the Utah DOT’s Communications Division organization chart (Figure 2.1).⁵ Many agencies have embraced a decentralized, regional approach while others house communications professionals in a central office (CO). The farther away a communications unit is from leadership, the less effective it is.

A 2017 Minnesota DOT (MnDOT) survey of STA internal communications practices found most agencies generate internal communication messages at a CO, however, regional offices and other offices sometimes produce them. In some cases, CO communications teams coordinate with field divisions. In other cases, divisions generate their own communications (e.g., internal newsletters). Human resources professionals might conduct a final review of all emails sent to employees.

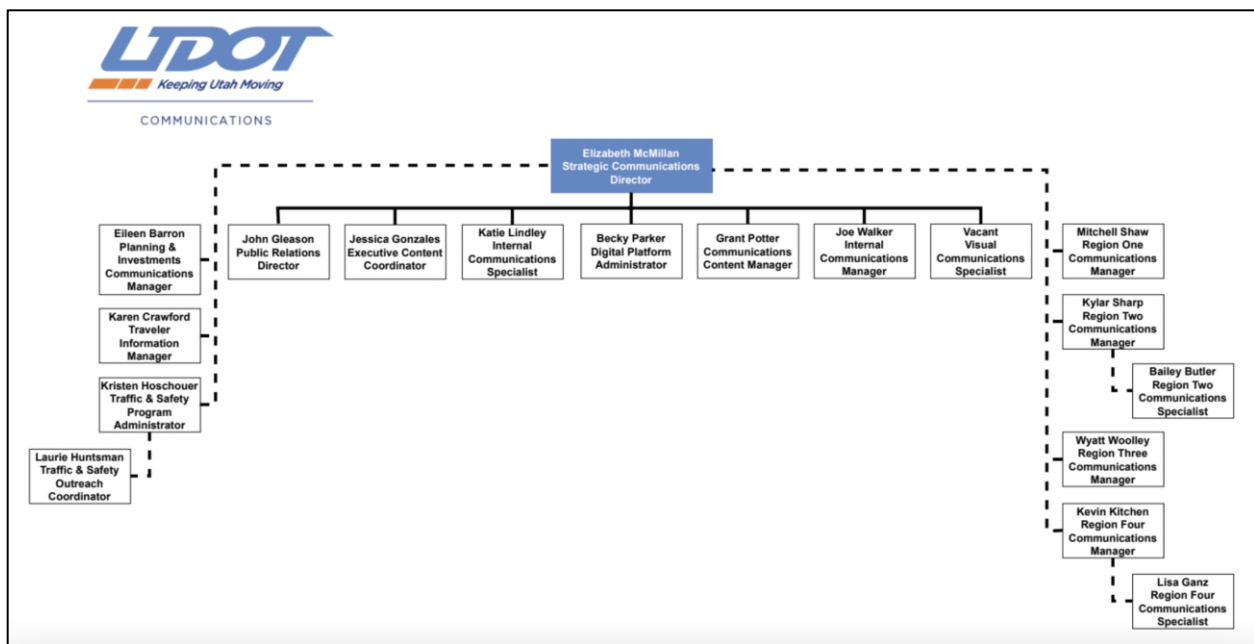


Figure 2.1 Utah DOT Communications Organizational Chart

2.5 Leadership and Internal Communications

Effective internal communication starts with agency executives championing an open, transparent, and honest leadership style that unites employees around a shared sense of purpose and builds and strengthens relationships throughout the organization. Although messages disperse in all directions, leaders are ultimately responsible for ensuring communication systems are effective (Carriere and Bourque, 2008; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021).

AASHTO (2017) defined communication principles at STAs, described roles and responsibilities of communications units, and reviewed tools for developing and evaluating the effectiveness of communication strategies (with examples of performance measures, program-specific communications plans, and organizational charts). According to AASHTO, “The effectiveness of communications at a DOT is ultimately the responsibility of the agency head.

⁵ UDOT’s Communications Division org chart is located at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/17quPW2542lenKJu8NhlZLtD4vANWOFw5/view>

Whether they are called director, secretary, or commissioner, the top leader at the agency has authority over every part of the DOT including the communications function” (2017, p. 11).

Many researchers have looked at the impact of organizational leadership on workplace culture, communications, and return on investment (ROI). Leadership at different levels directly and indirectly influences organizational culture, climate, and communications (Men, 2014; Yukl, 2006) and affects employee engagement. Executive staff lead by example, representing the organization’s values and embodying its culture (i.e., how things are done). Gallup (2023) found employee engagement is foundational to organizational cultures, with employee perceptions of their organization’s purpose and culture “directly linked to measures of business health.” The most effective workplaces create an aspirational culture that is “strengths-based, engagement focused, and performance oriented.”

Leadership Style

Employee perceptions of their organizations are shaped more by leadership styles (i.e., what is communicated and what leaders do) than formal communications (e.g., newsletters, videos) (Berger, 2011). Matha and Bohm (2004) identified five communication profiles: open, command, rumor, reporting, and discussion. Organizations that embrace open communication outperform others on key performance measures (e.g., growth, profit, stock prices). Open communication styles allow information to move up, down, and across the organization “in a very fluid, open, inclusive, disciplined fashion” (Matha and Boehm, 2008, p. 17).

A command-style or transactional communication model — where executive staff dictate orders and expect unquestioning compliance — is not very effective. It is tone-deaf to employee needs and does not permit staff to provide feedback to make organizational improvements. According to Gallup, “Managers matter. And their talent in the role (or lack thereof) directly affects how employees experience the workplace. Gallup data find that managers account for up to 70% of the variation in employee engagement scores.” (Gallup Exceptional Workplace Awards, 2023; Gallup, 2015).

Leadership Disconnection

Many individuals in executive leadership roles assume they have good communication skills because they occupy leadership positions (P. Smudde, personal communication, January 20, 2023). But research paints a different picture. Often, gaps exist between what leaders intend and how their messages are interpreted.

Survey data from Axios HQ (2022) reveal a disconnect between communicators and employees. Problems worsen as organizations grow and more teams send out information. In large organizations, 80% of internal updates are communicated by multiple teams. Most (66%) communicators claim to know what information and updates their employees need, however, only 31% of employees agree. While 74% of communicators believe their updates are concise, just 40% of employees concur. Despite 45% of communicators reporting that they do not get enough feedback, about one-third of employees say they lack a clear place to share feedback.

Poor leadership and communication styles lower employee satisfaction and lead to disengagement. Ineffective communication has negative consequences for individual workers and organizations overall.

The Impacts of Poor Communication

The negative consequences of poor communication include:

- Disengaged employees
- Increased absenteeism

- Lower employee productivity
- More incidents of injury
- Increased employee turnover
- Poor customer service
- Lower shareholder returns

Inconsistent or disorganized communication from leadership reduces trust, credibility, and legitimacy (Cheney and Christensen, 2011). Employees who perceive that their needs and feedback are ignored tend to disengage (Gallup, 2023; Klein, 2019). According to Wells (2017), disengaged employees:

- Are less productive
- Take more time off
- Have increased turnover
- Have a lower life satisfaction
- Are less likely to feel that their time and voice are valued.

Replacing employees is expensive (as much as twice a person’s salary) (McFeely and Wigert, 2019). Poor communication also degrades workplace safety (Gallup, 2023). Higher numbers of workplace injuries occur in organizations in which staff do not have adequate training, the means to provide important feedback, or are unwilling to speak up if they observe unsafe conditions.

Transformational Leadership

Organizations with effective internal communications recognize that top-down communication no longer works (Men, 2014). Effective organizational communications require listening to employee wants and needs, taking action, promoting open dialogue, and aligning internal communication with the organization’s strategic plan. All messages — regardless of source — should align with organizational goals.

Through open communication, leaders can have honest and transparent conversations with employees, which builds credibility and trust (Jiang and Luo, 2017; Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Good leaders leverage face-to-face communication channels, which increases employee satisfaction (Men, 2014). Leaders at exceptional workplaces hold meaningful conversations with employees to deepen relationships (Gallup, 2023) and are transparent about strategies and organizational policies (e.g., hybrid work arrangements). Transparent communication generates positive “employee organization relationships” and “pro-organizational behaviors” (Lee and Dong, 2023)

2.6 Organizational Benefits of Effective Internal Communications

Supportive organizational conditions engender positive outcomes such as employee engagement, job satisfaction, and employer attractiveness (Meng and Berger, 2019; Tkalac Verčič, 2021). In the private sector, organizations that embrace open communications enjoy higher short- and medium- stock returns and profit margins (Matha and Boehm, 2008). STAs with effective internal communications have stronger public reputations and are in a better position to obtain funding (Stein and Sloane, 2001; AASHTO, 2017). The organizational benefits of effective internal communications are listed below.

- Builds trust and shared purpose
- Informs and aligns employees
- Improves engagement

- Inspires and encourages innovation
- Elevates mentoring opportunities
- Enhances leadership visibility
- Improves performance and increases productivity
- Recruits more qualified candidates and reduces turnover
- Improves employee satisfaction and retention
- Reduces absenteeism
- Facilitates behavior change

Builds Trust and Shared Purpose

Internal communications build a sense of community and unite team members around a central goal. Many factors contribute to trust (e.g., leadership behaviors) (Men, 2014). When organizations deliver honest messages, follow through on promises, and talk openly with employees, staff place more trust in leadership (Jian and Luo, 2017). This contributes to a strong organizational culture and increases employee satisfaction as they internalize and establish an identity around the brand. That shared identity builds stronger relationships.

Keeps Employees Informed and Aligned

Employees want information about the direction of an organization, including administrative and personnel changes (White et al., 2010), personal performance (Al-Ghamdi et al., 2007), and training and development opportunities. Internal communications deliver information to employees. They help employees understand the organization, its strategies, and policies (Men and Bowen, 2017). As information accumulates, it encourages positive contributions from employees, facilitates sharing knowledge, and bridges knowledge gaps. If a change occurs in an organization, employees better understand why the change is happening and are more likely to accept and adopt behaviors that support the change.

Enhances Engagement

Internal communications positively affect employee attitudes, motivations, trust, and engagement (Berger, 2011). Work attitudes influence work outcomes (Carriere and Bourque, 2008; Tkalac Verčič, 2021). When employees feel satisfied at work, positive about their work experiences, and trust organizational leadership, they become more engaged. Effective internal communications empower employees to participate in dialogue, build employee loyalty and identification with the organization, and lead to higher job satisfaction and enthusiasm. Gallup found “engaged employees have higher wellbeing, better retention, lower absenteeism and higher productivity” (Employee Engagement Indicator). Compared to businesses that suffer from low employee engagement, businesses with higher employee engagement see 24% less turnover, a 17% higher productivity, and 20% higher sales.

Inspires and Encourages Innovation

Open, transformative communication encourages and rewards staff for sharing ideas. This increases motivation and levels of commitment (Nakra, 2006). For example, Toyota embraces kaizen (continuous improvement) as one of its core principles. Toyota solicits improvement ideas from employees and financially rewards staff when a new process based on their idea is implemented.

Elevates Mentoring Opportunities

Sharing information, bridging knowledge gaps, and building relationships involves mentoring and coaching. More experienced employees or leaders pair with less experienced employees for training opportunities. Mentoring also deepens bonds between employees and management, enhancing trust and credibility.

Enhances Leadership Visibility

Communication strategies that amplify their visibility help leaders build relationships with employees across an entire organization. Leaders may provide coaching for managers or use other tactics to provide touchpoints with employees agencywide. For example, this might include face-to-face meetings or addressing employees through webinars and social media.

Improves Performance and Increases Productivity

Effective internal communication builds connections across organizational units. Evaluating how information flows between units and across processes supports the efficient management of resources, eliminates redundancies, and leads to new policies and processes that eliminate or reduce bottlenecks. For example, in Vermont, bridge inspectors would inform district maintenance staff about maintenance needs. However, insufficient staffing meant the needs could not be attended to. A Transportation Asset Management Plan (TAMP) was prepared that requires inspections be entered into a digital information system that automates work orders, which streamlines the process, reduces delays, and adds accountability. This filled a communication gap (Varma and Proctor, 2020).

Recruits More Qualified Candidates and Reduces Turnover

LinkedIn reported an exemplary workplace culture increases qualified applicants by 50% and reduces organization turnover 28% (Employer Brand Statistics). As employees become more engaged, they create a shared identity with the organization and in return strive to improve their work environment and products (Cheney and Christensen, 2011). Organizational cultures that support employees through safety, innovation, diversity, and inclusion strengthen recruitment and retention while transforming staff into brand advocates (e.g., Lee and Dong, 2023).

Improves Employee Satisfaction and Retention

Employees accrue socio-emotional benefits by building trusting relationships and integrating work into their own identity (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Overall, they experience lower levels of stress (Qin and Men, 2023) and higher life satisfaction (Sinčić Ćorić et al., 2020, Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Organizations support employee well-being by establishing and communicating employee benefits (health, financial, social) through human resources, informing staff about benefits and encouraging their use, and posting information about benefits on an easily accessible intranet or digital app.

Reduces Absenteeism and Improves Safety

Absenteeism and safety incidents are less problematic in organizations whose missions make employees feel like their jobs are important. In organizations where employees feel valued, internal communication strategies are used to improve safety by:

- Training employees in safe practices
- Increasing knowledge of roles, responsibilities, procedures in case of a safety issue
- Providing employees a way to share safety concerns
- Tracking safety issues
- Facilitating crisis management

Aligning workers with a mission of safety increases risk awareness (Lee, 2022; Zara et al., 2023). This can be done through workplace training (e.g., face-to-face, developing training manuals), safety policy updates, regular project meetings to set goals, brief safety moments, printed or digital signage, incident reports, and documented safety plans.

Facilitates Behavior Change

A primary function of internal communications is to facilitate behavior change. Organizations promote or discourage actions with an eye toward improving organizational and individuals' wellbeing.

Enhances STA Image and Potential Legislative Funding

Employee advocacy burnishes an organization's reputation and credibility with external stakeholders (Lee and Dong, 2023; Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Poister and Slyke (2001) demonstrated that if an STA improves its image among internal and external stakeholders public support and legislative funding can increase. AASHTO (2017) found that favorable stories about agencies place them in a better position to secure funding.

2.7 Internal Communication Challenges

A primary challenge with internal communications is making sure that messages reach their intended audience and are not lost in organizational clutter and noise. When messages do not specifically target their intended audience, information does not reach them. As such, organizations need to attend to the special needs and communication preferences of different employee groups.

Clutter

The proliferation of communication channels (e.g., email, text messaging, instant messaging, in-person meetings, video conferencing, newsletters, podcasts, video channels, multiple apps, and more) and content (e.g., policy changes, project updates, meeting calls, timesheet details, event notifications, IT upgrades, HR benefits information) creates information overload (FWI and Poppulo, 2022). Workers stretched for time get into the habit of skimming and deleting messages.

MnDOT's 2017 survey of transportation agencies found most communications are ad hoc. Agencies do not plan or coordinate the distribution of messages. Gallup (2023) found that less than half of employees feel informed about their company's business goals. Messages employees receive are often flawed, confusing, lack transparency, or are irrelevant (Axios HQ, 2022). Clutter increases stress and impacts employee mental and physical well-being (FWI and Poppulo, 2022).

Organizations need to reduce the level of noise and streamline processes through short, succinct, consolidated messages (Axios HQ, 2022). Axios HQ (2022) and FWI and Poppulo (2022) recommended the following strategies to reduce clutter:

- Do not send more messages than necessary.
- Keep messages short and relevant to work roles and business priorities. These may include multi-item updates in one message.
- Provide opportunities for employees to give feedback (e.g., in-person meetings, digital apps).
- Use multiple channels and content types, personalized to reach all workers.

Targeted messaging through preferred channel(s) reduces clutter. Many organizations use apps to centralize and streamline all communications. The apps let employees communicate with managers, send feedback to executive leadership, and access organizational systems (e.g., HR, IT, project documents).

Workforce Diversity

Today's workforce is more diverse than ever. Aspects of diversity increase the challenge of reaching all employees:

- **Multigenerational:** Four or five generations of workers may be in the same organization (Gen Z through Baby Boomers).
- **Multiple languages:** Employees may speak multiple languages. English may not be their preferred language.
- **Educational attainment:** Employees have different levels of education depending on their role.
- **Different communication and technology preferences:** Employees may work in person, remotely, or have a hybrid schedule. They may be spread across a state or live beyond its borders.

Technology and communication preferences evolve in tandem. Because preference may change quickly, agencies should document employee preferences rather than making assumptions based on prior literature (which may be dated).

Older generations tend to prefer traditional methods, are less willing to learn new communication tools, and are more likely to prefer face-to-face meetings and email over apps. Younger employees adopt new technologies quickly and prefer short messages (Men and Bowen, 2017). They often do not distinguish between the digital and physical, which can render meeting format (i.e., virtual, in-person) less important (FWI and Poppulo, 2022).

FWI and Poppulo (2022) documented several tips to narrow the age gap and enhance inclusivity across staff: “treat everyone as an individual, get to know your workforce, encourage reverse mentoring, acknowledge age diversity, use a variety of channels and content, ask for feedback and improve.” Communicators must understand the needs and preferences of the workforce, acknowledge diversity, and treat everyone as an individual.

Unplugged, Frontline Employees

Although the hybrid and remote workforce grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, roughly 70% of the US workforce consists of frontline workers who may have no or limited access to technology throughout the day (McKinsey and Company, 2022). They may not use email or apps as a primary means of communication. Frontline employees who are unplugged often feel marginalized, isolated, forgotten, and ignored because they have no way of engaging in dialogue with their organization (Smith, 2023).

MnDOT (2017) found that STAs commonly provide field staff printed materials. They also hold meetings to deliver information or send emails. Some field offices have video monitors, kiosks, or digital signage. These visual tools provide important information or updates. In 2014, the Virginia DOT began installing touchscreen electronic bulletin boards in field offices. Iowa DOT has worked to provide field employees with mobile phones (AASHTO, 2017).

Designing communications strategies to ensure messages reach those who are least connected is critical for getting all staff on the same page. Methods that organizations use to reach and engage with frontline employees include:

- Printing internal information for field employees
- Placing a suggestion box in the employee breakroom
- Minimizing the volume and delivering focused content
- Engaging frontline managers in communications training and providing toolkits
- Using video monitors, digital signs, or kiosks
- Providing field crews with mobile phones/devices
- Adopting an organizational online portal or app

Chapter 3 Best Practices for Internal Communication Strategies

Based on information presented in the last chapter, this chapter lists and describes communications best practices that KYTC can use as a starting point for developing an internal communications plan.

Promote a Culture of Communication and Collaboration

Any communications strategy must receive agencywide buy-in, particularly from leadership. Leadership needs to invest in communications, embrace dialogue and listening, and build environments where everyone can speak up. People want their work to be meaningful and make a difference. Building a workplace defined by a shared purpose and collaborative communities is thus critical. Providing employees with resources and tools for communications helps motivate employees and signals that good communications is critical to the organization (TRB, 2004).

Organizations benefit immensely from treating communication as a core competency. Once communication has been positioned as a core competency, organizations need to define the basic communication skillset required of all employees, communications skillsets required in different subject-matter areas, and specialized skillsets that are required of executive leaders who are responsible for managing strategic internal communications.

Define Responsibilities for Internal Communications

Organizations benefit from treating employee communications as a distinct skillset and hiring experts to craft and implement internal communications policies (Raywood and Butcher, 2021). A growing number of firms are giving Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) a seat at the leadership table so they understand the context and underlying purpose of policy decisions and organizational objectives. With this knowledge, they can help shape messaging to ensure it conveys to employees why particular actions or decisions matter and how they will further organizational strategies. By interacting with employees agencywide, CCOs can identify which communications strategies are the most effective at motivating staff and increasing engagement.

Develop a Strategic Plan for Internal Communications

All organizations should adopt a strategic communications plan that is proactive, empirically grounded, measurable, and evaluated based on desired outcomes or ROI (UAB, 2021). Development of a communications plan should follow a four-step process (Research, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation) to make sure that all communications activities align with organizational goals.

Conduct an Internal Communications Audit

A communication audit evaluates an organization's communications, identifies problems, and sets benchmarks for performance metrics (Downs and Adrian, 2004). Qualitative and quantitative methods can be used (e.g., interviews, focus groups, questionnaires). Audit results are used to identify strengths and weaknesses and create (or update) an organization's communication plan (UAB, 2021). Most audits examine communications systems, processes, and people, and collect data on:

- How work processes impact communication
- The flow of information and its distribution to employees
- Communication networks and the quality of communication relationships
- How effective the organization functions as a communication system
- How employees use communication technology
- How well communication strategies are linked to organizational strategies and outcomes

Define Audience(s)

Organizations can use audit results to build an internal stakeholder map. As part of this process, it is important to define who needs to be reached, describe the behaviors messages should elicit, and review what messages need to be communicated to increase knowledge, encourage behaviors, or change attitudes.

Data collected on employee motivations, attitudes, perceptions, sentiment, satisfaction, behaviors, expectations, engagement as well as organizational culture and the influence of leadership styles can inform the development of targeted, effective messaging (Downs and Adrian, 2004; Hargie and Tourish, 2009; FitzPatrick and Valskov, 2017).

Use an Employee-Centric Approach to Measurement

Employee feedback submitted during the audit sheds light on communication preferences. The assessment should focus on what is important to employees, what their needs are, and how best to meet those needs through content and their preferred communications channels (Ruck and Welch, 2012; Welch and Jackson, 2007; Uusi-Rauva and Nurkka, 2010). FWI and Poppulo (2021) identified questions that organizations can ask employees to document their communications preferences:

- How is the employer brand perceived?
- How are leaders perceived?
- How can I get leaders to participate in internal communications?
- What channels and media do employees prefer and why?
- What are the best times of day/week to send communications?
- How frequently should messages be sent before an employee feels like it is too much?
- What issues and frustrations do employees have?
- How do employees consume messages and learn best?
- What employee behaviors need to change?
- What new habits do employees need to form?
- Does culture need to transform or not? If so, how?
- Is our employer brand ready to use? Do we need to create it from scratch or can we elevate the existing version?
- What are the capabilities and capacity of the current team?
- How does my team need to grow to support my vision?

Plan with Outcomes in Mind

Planning internal communications establishes a clear roadmap that defines intended outcomes and paths for reaching specific goals. It begins with leaders laying out a clear strategy for aligning the communications plan with an organization's broader strategy. During planning, an organization explores communication goals, audiences, objectives, strategies, and tactics by answering the following questions:

- What are the goals of communicating with employees?
 - Goals may include informing, changing behaviors, shifting perceptions, and increasing engagement.
- Who are the target audiences?
 - Defining target audiences requires the development of a detailed internal stakeholder map and articulating each stakeholder's roles and needs. This information helps an organization develop targeted messaging.
- What is the desired objective or outcome of communications and how will success be measured?
- What strategies and tactics will be used to communicate with intended audiences and achieve objectives?
- How will a message's impact be measured and evaluated?

- Detailed data should be collected on message channels, content, and the timing of message delivery.

Communication strategies should always remain flexible to account for changing organization dynamics (Raywood and Butcher, 2021).

Elements of a Communications Plan

Analysis from the planning phase can be used to assemble an internal communications plan that lets employees know *why* communications matter to them and the organization. Organizations may choose to develop multiple plans — an overarching framework for the entire organization with long-term goals and separate tactical plans for achieving short-term goals. The Public Relations Society of America (UAB, 2021) recommends a 10-step process for drafting a communications plan:

1. Overall Goals: Communication goals are consistent with the organizational mission and goals and geared toward end results. Adopt no more than 3-5 goals.
2. Target Audiences: Who are the stakeholders? Who needs to know information, will provide support, and/or have a vested interest?
3. Objectives for Key Audiences: What does the audience need to know (awareness), feel (opinion), or do (behavior)? Objectives may differ between audiences. Objectives should be stated as the desired result within a given timeframe.
4. Strategies: What approach(es) will be used to meet objectives?
5. Tactics: What actions will be taken to execute the strategies?
6. Activities: What activities are necessary to execute tactics (e.g., specific communication channels, events)?
7. Evaluation: How will communication plans be evaluated for success or ROI? What will be measured to gauge changes in organizational performance and employee attitudes, behaviors, and engagement?
8. Materials: What resources are necessary to implement tactics?
9. Budget: What are the costs required to implement the plan (e.g., staff time, materials)?
10. Timeline and Task List: Who does what and when? What is the timeframe for delivering communications and evaluating their impacts?

Implement the Communications Plan

Organizations implement communications plan(s) by operationalizing strategies and tactics spelled out in the plan(s). This includes delivering targeted messages to target audiences through different communication channels.

Define Strategies, Tactics, and Activities

Organizations achieve communications-related objectives through internal communications strategies. Guisbond (2017) reviewed strategies adopted by General Electric as it re-engineered the firm's culture:

- A redesigned performance and review process
- Integrating internal and external communications for effective brand storytelling
- Delivering messages where they will be easily seen (e.g., LinkedIn)
- Using leaders as primary spokespeople for delivering brand messages and using employees as secondary spokespeople for sharing stories (i.e., brand advocacy)
- Communicating consistently and transparently, telling the organization's stories often and in unique ways to engage internal and external stakeholders

If a communications audit shows that relationships are suffering (e.g., broken manager-employee communications), the organization can focus on improving those relationships through developing line-of-sight managers to prevent micromanagement, which discourages employees (Gallup, 2017; Buron, et al., 2013). In this example, the strategy is to improve relationships, the tactic is to develop line-of-sight managers, and an activity is providing managers with communication messages and toolkits to encourage employees. Another tactic for improving manager-employee relationships and employee performance is having managers and their supervisees take part in frequent discussions focused on performance (Jiang and Luo, 2017; Gallup, 2017). Discussions can be formal or informal and are valuable because they provide employees meaningful feedback on their progress and future.

FitzPatrick and Valskov (2017) reviewed examples of communication tactics, although it is worth remembering that organizations should tailor tactics to their individual needs:

- Use testimonials and storytelling to share success stories about the organization and employees to build connection and credibility.
- Communicate safety by transmitting emergency notifications across channels.
- Incentivize process or performance improvements.
- Provide line-of-sight managers with training to coach employees.
- Develop an employee app to communicate with all employees.
- Strategically place digital signage (visual reminders).
- Implement opt-in/opt-out for emails.
- Establish an Employee Appreciation Day with activities and gifts.
- Expand mentoring and training programs.
- Inform employees about employer-sponsored discounts.
- Provide well-being webinars and financial-wellness tools.

Adopt a Messaging Strategy

Employees perceive spoken and written forms of communication differently, with interpretations shaped by the presence or absence of non-verbal communication cues and individual communication preferences. Some tactics focus on improving messaging, such as determining the best time of day to deliver messages for the highest level of engagement. Marques (2010) proposed best practices for composing messages — regardless of form or delivery method:

- Clear and concise
- Consistent
- Responsible
- Proactive
- Relevant
- Timely
- Accurate
- Easily found
- Responsible, professional, and credible executive-level communications

In general, employees prefer short, multi-item updates relevant to their work roles. To honor this preference, organizations should keep updates succinct, minimize the number of messages sent, and use multiple methods to reach staff (e.g., emails, meetings).

Embrace Honesty

Employees want managers to listen to their needs, and to communicate transparently and honestly even if the news is bad. Silence from leadership during a crisis leaves employees uneasy and breaks trust (Men and Bowen, 2017). Part of creating a culture of communication is sending messages that are unvarnished and transparent.

Create Two-Way Dialogue

Two-way dialogue creates opportunities for conversations; provides a way for employees to offer feedback, voice concerns and ideas, and participate in organizational planning and messaging; and lets staff build connections and meaning (Burton et al., 2013). Organizational leadership should listen closely to employee feedback and modify strategies where appropriate (FWI and Poppulo, 2022)

Adopt Targeted Messages

A targeted approach to communications reduces distraction and content overload (FWI and Poppulo, 2021; Axios, 2022). Organizations should adapt messaging to audiences based on communication preferences and deliver messages in a well-timed manner (Edelman, 2023)

Identify Appropriate Channels

FitzPatrick and Valskov (2017) identified communications channels in widespread use:

- Meetings (face-to-face, virtual)
- Emails
- Intranet
- Social Media
- Video, webinars, podcasts, internal TV
- Newsletters, magazines, newspapers
- Electronic Noticeboards
- Text messages
- Digital Applications
- Events
- Workplace Incentives, Competitions

STAs leverage many of these channels. The Maryland DOT⁶ Transit Administration's Office of Communications and Marketing produces a monthly television show that airs in 14 of the state's jurisdictions. The Indiana DOT⁷ reaches audiences through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Podcasts, and YouTube. KYTC's Office of Public Affairs⁸ taps into external audiences through social media, video productions, and events.

Evaluate the Communications Plan

Once an organization implements a communications plan, it should continuously evaluate its performance to assess whether communication strategies continue to align with business and employee needs. The plan can be revised if the reach and impact of messaging drop below expectations.

Track and Measure Performance

⁶ <https://www.mta.maryland.gov/mta-commuter-connections>

⁷ <https://www.in.gov/indot/media-room/connect-with-social-media/>

⁸ <https://transportation.ky.gov/PublicAffairs/Pages/default.aspx>

Organizations must choose performance metrics that reflect what is important to leadership and staff. Qualitative and quantitative metrics are valuable, and the evaluation process can use methods such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, content analysis, and network analysis (Downs and Adrian, 2004). Questions that can be used to evaluate performance include:

- Does a communication tactic result in more informed employees or change behaviors?
- Do employees understand the content of a message?
- How many people attend meetings, use technology, and read messages? Are they responding?
- Are there more opportunities for mentoring?
- Are relationship dynamics improving?
- How are work processes changing?

Many assessment tools are available, like communication effectiveness and communication satisfaction surveys. MnDOT (2017) found that how and when STAs monitor employee feedback varies by organization. Most agencies use periodic surveys. Other methods include click rates on webpages and emails as well as anecdotal feedback. Organizations should not rely only on metrics to understand performance. Comments submitted by employees (e.g., through interviews or focus groups) provide a glimpse into why staff feel and act the way that they do.

Engage Transformational Technologies

Technologies that distribute information and track employee engagement provide a valuable function. Raywood and Butcher (2021) suggested building two-way employee engagement platforms “to engage, inform, and track employee sentiment and engagement.” Customizable IT solutions are available that track performance measures and let employees communicate with direct supervisors and escalate issues to leadership. In a large organization, having a scalable and consistent communication platform lets leadership reach employees across all levels, including frontline workers (DaVinix). One valuable IT solution is developing a checklist for implementing new processes and procedures. KYTC is building a dashboard that displays external and internal performance metrics.

Sustain Efforts

Once a communication plan proves to be effective, an organization must commit to sustaining what works and continue to measure effectiveness. Monitoring effectiveness is critical for achieving continuous improvement, developing a toolbox of internal communications tactics, and identifying areas that can be strengthened.

Chapter 4 KYTC Next Steps for Implementation

Based on the material in previous chapters and feedback from a small group of KYTC staff, below we summarize opportunities for strengthening internal communications at the agency.

Treat Communication as a Core Competency

Communication is a core competency that requires training. Training employees throughout KYTC to communicate effectively can reduce turnover, improve performance, foster more transparent manager-employee relationships, and streamline information flows. All new employees should receive training in core communications skills during the onboarding process, while veteran employees and leadership will benefit from courses in communication and leadership skills.

Enhance Mentoring Opportunities to Bridge Knowledge Gaps

KYTC is developing an employee mentoring program, although this strategy has not been fully executed. Knowledge gaps between new and experienced employees persist. In some cases, supervisors do not communicate critical information to newer employees. Veteran staff understand that change happens quickly within KYTC and need to make sure new staff keep pace with changes and learn to recognize them in real time. Promoting a coaching culture and establishing mentoring programs offers a structured approach that will benefit newer staff. A best practice for pairing new employees with experienced mentors is to create an updated organizational chart that specifies roles and years of experience.

Keep Information in One Place to Minimize Clutter

Information clutter proliferates, especially when staff receive redundant information through multiple sources. As such, KYTC should be proactive in reducing clutter. Two methods of reducing clutter overload are to use a primary channel of message delivery and to place all information in a central location. Centralizing communications reduces the need for multiple units to send messages with the same content. Individual emails should have clean, uncluttered layouts so they clearly convey information to recipients. One way to achieve this is to embrace bullet lists whenever possible. Another way to reduce clutter is to consolidate non-urgent messages and send out one, multi-item update.

Create Opportunities to Build KYTC's Culture and Improve Engagement

Because KYTC workers are spread across the state, many may not feel a strong sense of culture or connectedness to one another or the rest of the organization (e.g., other Districts or Central Office). The Cabinet would benefit from an internal communications audit that dives into employee perceptions of the agency's culture and provides direction for tactics to promote a sense of belonging and bolster engagement.

Steps for Implementation

Based on our discussions with KYTC staff and a broad assessment of the organization's internal communications, we recommend the following actions:

1. Conduct a Communications Audit

A communications audit is a starting point for developing an overarching strategic plan for internal communications. This audit should investigate communication functions and policies, with an emphasis on processes, systems, and people. Audit results can be used to identify areas for improvement and establish benchmarks for key performance indicators.

2. Develop a Communications Plan

KYTC can use audit results to begin development of an internal communications plan. The audit will document valuable information about internal stakeholders, relationships, and communications practices. Based on these data, the Cabinet can formulate communications objectives that align with the agency's mission and vision. With these objectives in mind, the agency can develop strategies and tactics to build stronger communications systems that will positively impact employee knowledge, engagement, and behaviors.

3. Build a Communications Toolkit

Once an internal communications plan is in place and the agency has settled on effective strategies and tactics, communications stakeholders can develop a communications toolkit that consists of a mix of tactics which build employee engagement. The toolbox's contents should be updated (i.e., tactics added or removed) in response to analysis of performance data and the emergence of new technologies.

Although KYTC lacks a centralized internal communications strategic plan, some Offices and Divisions have begun developing plans on their own. KTC is available to coordinate work in this area, from research and planning to implementation and evaluation.

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