Smart guide

5 ways employees would improve internal communication

Insights from 30 years of research

DAVIS
& COMPANY

Introduction

By listening to thousands of employees through focus groups, interviews and surveys, we've gained a unique perspective about what employees want from communication. Now you can use our insights to create and deliver more effective employee communication in your organization.

We combed through all data we've collected over 30 years, focusing on one question: If you could change one thing about employee communication, what would it be?

We asked over **19,000 employees** to share their perspectives on the best way to improve internal communication.

What's inside

- **Introduction**

- **5 ways employees would improve internal communication**

- **Tool: How does your communication stack up?**

- **How to meet employees' expectations**

5 ways employees would improve internal communication
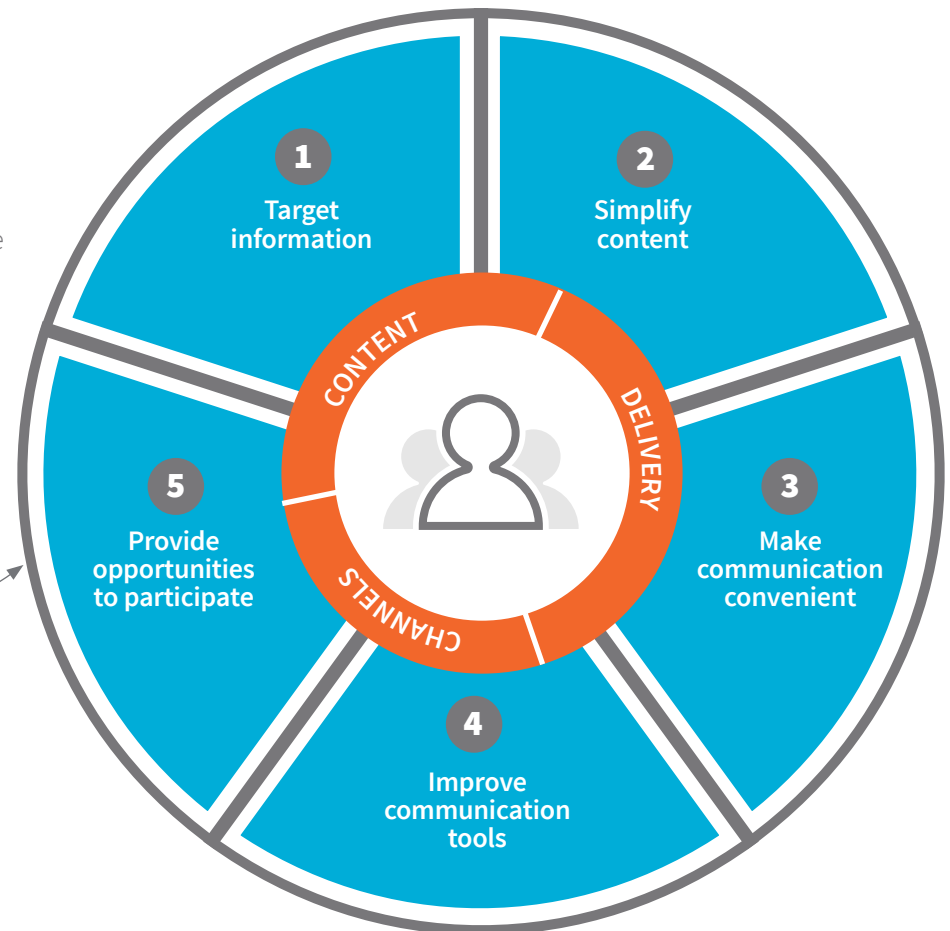
Our research included:

- **29 research studies** (surveys and focus groups)
- **23 companies** across an array of industries, including chemical, consumer products, financial services, hospitality, manufacturing, pharma/healthcare and telecoms/media

Why should you care? As someone who needs to communicate, these ideas can help you immediately improve communication or shaping future strategies.

No matter which industry or organization employees work for, they want the same things from communication:

Use our self-evaluation tool on page 13 to understand how your communication aligns with employees' expectations.

1 Target information

2 Simplify content

3 Make communication convenient

4 Improve communication tools

5 Provide opportunities to participate

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1 Target information

Making information relevant (how it applies to each role or location) is a key strategy to capture employees' attention.

Real quotes from real employees

**Relevant.** Employees expect communication to be personalized for their role, location or department.

Tailor emails to specific departments. Make it relevant.

I would like to have our own portals on the intranet, so we could filter what's important to us.

Better targeted information. I get a flood of information and it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the important from the unimportant.

More local information. I get too much corporate information, but we don't know what's going on in our own building.
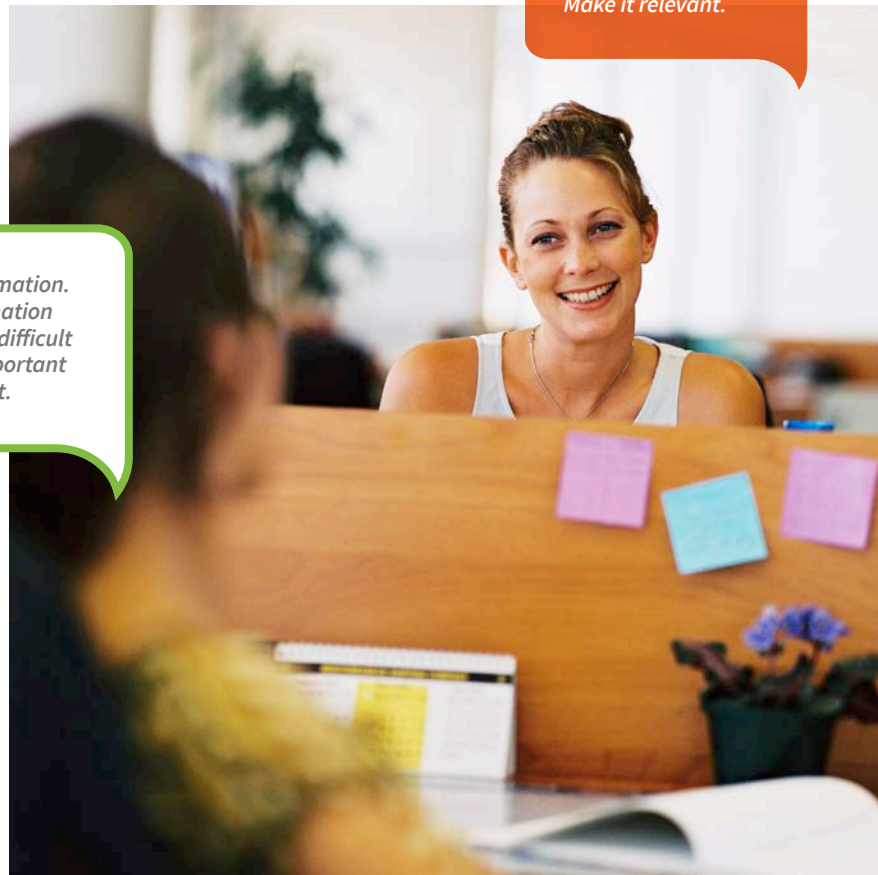
Designing HR communication that breaks through

The HR team at a recent spinoff from a pharmaceutical company was challenged with recreating all of its programs. In fact, most teams across the organization were working through similar updates and changes. Within this complex environment, HR communication had to break through so employees understood changes and what to do.

We worked with the HR team to develop a communication strategy that targeted three groups (HR business partners, people managers and employees) with a monthly email summarizing key HR initiatives. Each digest was customized by group and featured:

• A to-do list with up to three actions

• Resources to help everyone learn about key topics

① Target information

"**Topics I care about.**" Employees are quick to highlight the topics that interest them—from getting everyday work done to understanding the big picture. The challenge is these topics may not always align with what leaders, HR and others want to share.

> "What are the company's goals and our plan to get there. How are we doing?"

> "What are the plans for my region/site/business unit?"

> "Help me do my job and be successful."

> *Provide more details around organizational changes that impact me directly, including a comprehensive org chart.*

> *I would like to see more site-specific information on the intranet. A summary of my plant and how it is doing against our goals.*

> *Have more frequent updates on things affecting my position, my group's growth and the company's expansion.*
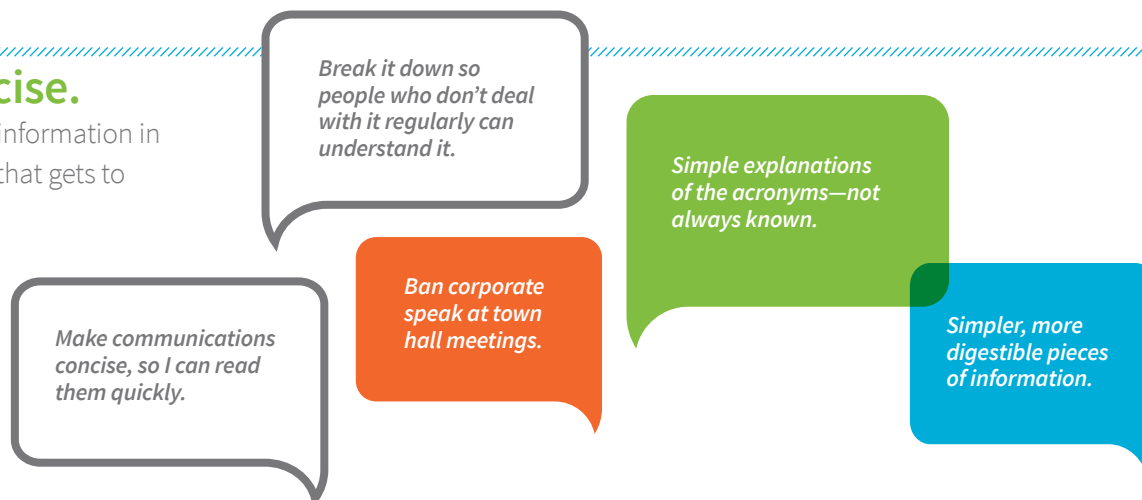
> *Be more focused on my site's performance, issues and resolutions.*
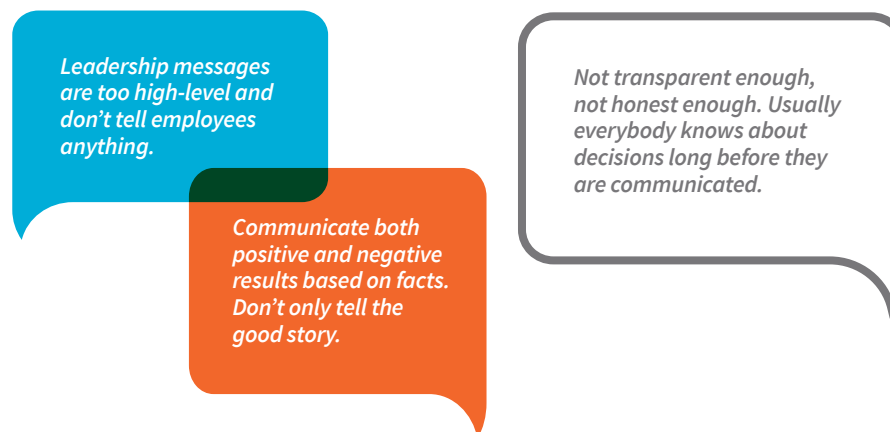
2 Simplify content

Employees are interested in reducing both complexity and the degree of difficulty to make details easy to digest.

Clear/concise.

Employees want information in simple language that gets to the point.

> Break it down so people who don't deal with it regularly can understand it.

> Simple explanations of the acronyms—not always known.

> Make communications concise, so I can read them quickly.

> Ban corporate speak at town hall meetings.

> Simpler, more digestible pieces of information.

Transparent. Employees

want honest communication that treats them like adults. They understand that everything doesn't always go as planned and want to hear both sides of the story.

> Leadership messages are too high-level and don't tell employees anything.

> Communicate both positive and negative results based on facts. Don't only tell the good story.

> Not transparent enough, not honest enough. Usually everybody knows about decisions long before they are communicated.

Communicating a new corporate strategy

When a new CEO joined this telecommunication company, he developed a five-year plan. Like most corporate strategies, this one came with its share of complexity: from corporate speak to multiple layers.

The communication team asked for our help with several communication deliverables designed to help employees understand the plan and how they could contribute.

At the core of our communication strategy was streamlining the five-year plan, so it would be easy to digest and understand:

- Simplifying content—moving from corporate speak to plain language
- Creating a structure—a pyramid that illustrated how all the parts fit together
- Providing examples—of how priorities impact teams

③ Make communication convenient

How communication is delivered is priority for employees—from making it more timely to managing volume.

Timely.
Employees require information when they need to act and before external audiences.

> Provide information in a timelier manner. Sometimes we 'hear it through the grapevine' before it is formally communicated.

> Having information earlier that will impact us allows us to build a base for our knowledge before it goes live [so] we will sound more knowledgeable with customers.

> Tell us about things as they happen, not days or weeks later.

Easy to access.
Convenient relates to how employees deal with communication in their personal lives: quick access to information that's easy to understand. And within the last few years, their definition has expanded to include mobile.

> Better formatting and more visuals in the emails. They are bland and boring.

> Make it easier to find job-critical links and information on the intranet. I waste a lot of time looking for things.

> Make it so I am able to read each article in its entirety on my iPad or phone.

> Organize all communications by subject in one place so people know where to look for an event or subject.

Example

Delivering bite-sized email

The HR team at this provider of mobile communication services launched a single performance management process for employees across its five markets. The challenge? Helping managers and employees quickly understand and participate in the new system.

Our communication solution included a series of targeted e-blasts—short, visual emails—translated across three languages. Each e-blast was targeted to either managers or employees, and was focused on a single action; for example, "Complete your self assessment."

By increasing the number of emails, sending them right before action was required and making them visual (with just 50 to 75 words), we encouraged readership and built knowledge of the new process.

The result? Managers and employees understood their roles and when they needed to take action.

Volume/frequency.

Employees are inundated with information and want key details from fewer outlets with less repetition.

> *Reduce the number of communication vehicles. Gets to be information overload and main messages become lost or blurred.*

> *I find it confusing and not a good use of my time when I receive the same news multiple times.*

> *Much less, there is so much that I cannot read most of it. And am concerned that I miss things that are important regarding actions.*

The conundrum of managing email

Does this sound familiar? Some employees want more emails and others want fewer?

- "One email, per week, summarize in blocks of topics, so you can skim and find topics of interest."
- "Daily email with events happening that day, reminders."

Think about the way you manage personal information: sometimes you want up-to-the-minute texts (Remember the last time your flight was delayed?) and on other occasions you want a monthly summary, such as new items from your favorite retailer.

Each of us uses different strategies to manage the communication we receive every day. And part of our challenge, as communicators, is to find those opportunities for employee communication. For example, with news posted on the intranet, give employees the ability to select: daily, weekly or no summaries.

4 Improve communication tools

Employees are frustrated with the channels their organizations use and have ideas to improve them.

Intranet.
Search is a key issue for employees: if they can't find information that helps them get the job done, there's little reason to visit. And when they get there, the intranet should be easy to navigate, while allowing for participation.
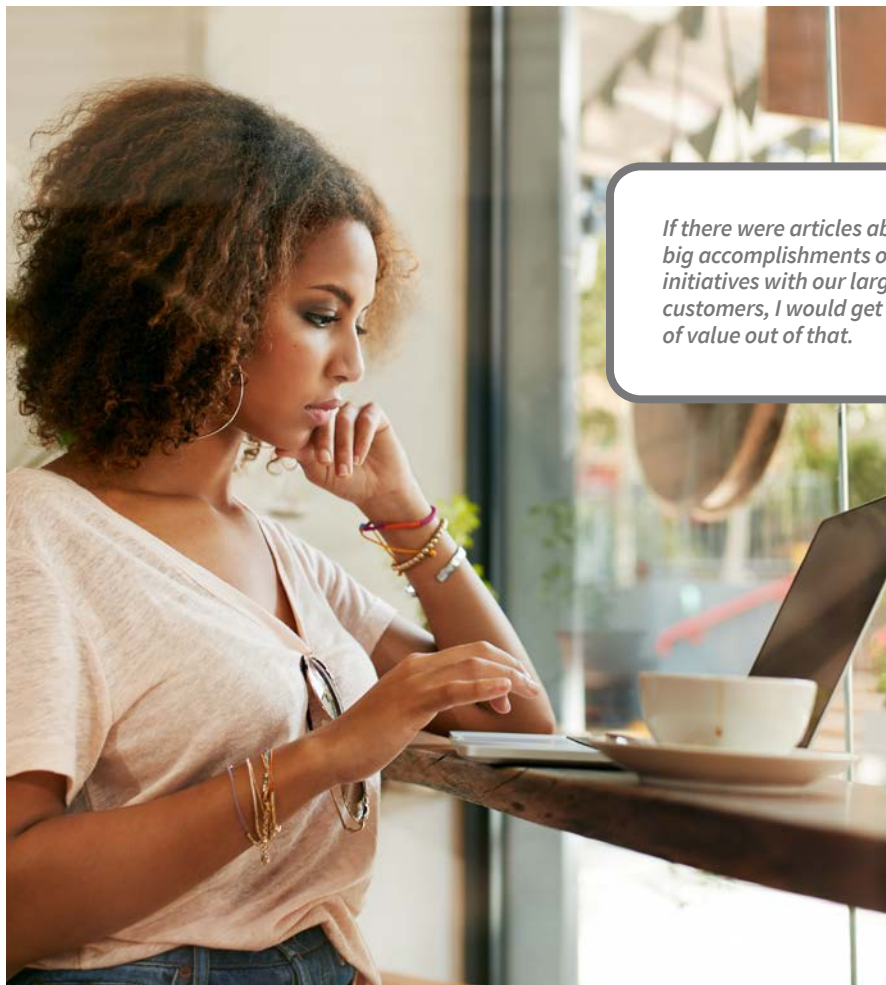
Too many SharePoint sites. It is very confusing.

Find a way to make going to the portal more necessary or rewarding.

[The intranet] content search is atrocious. It is really hard to find any information that is relevant.

The search is horrendous. It turns up documents that are out of date from 10 years ago.

Make the portal easier to navigate.

Keep it simple and keep it community-based.

Have a feedback section on the portal.

Email.
Employees want targeted emails that highlight key messages up front.

I would say the majority of emails I receive are written poorly. I don't know if they're asking me to do something or if it's just an information share. I think we could do it better: use subject lines, summarize succinctly what you're asking for or why it's important.

Reading them all takes too much time.

A lot of them do not pertain to my job duties.

④ Improve communication tools

Newsletters. While employees value newsletters, they seek information that provides unique perspectives on the organization and its people. All said in fewer words.

> *You don't know when something in the newsletter is important and when it's not.*

> *You're still left with more questions than answers.*

> *If there were articles about big accomplishments on initiatives with our larger customers, I would get a lot of value out of that.*

> *There's not enough time in the day to read the newsletter.*

> *I would read it if it worked more efficiently on the iPhone. Employees in the field don't have time to follow links to pages that won't open.*

> *They are too long. If I can get the gist of the message within the first few sentences that would be perfect.*

Improving a primary communication channel: employee newsletter

With employees in manufacturing and office settings, this leader in dietary supplements needed help making its print newsletter more engaging. That's where we came in.

To help the communication team educate employees about the business and recognize them for their hard work, we:

• Created editorial guidelines to limit word counts, improve titles and focus topics

• Enlisted an editorial board to identify stories that are meaningful to employees

• Redesigned the newsletter in an easy-to-read format: more visuals, shorter articles and an at-a-glance of company performance.

④ Improve communication tools

Town halls. Employees want to understand the topics being shared and have a chance to be involved.

Town hall speakers should not get too scientific as not everyone can follow along. It should be geared towards the general audience.

Small groups—lunch or breakfast with a few associates—can help to connect in a more real way.

More focus on remote employees to make them feel like they are part of the bigger picture. We would like to have more opportunities to participate online through chats, live feeds and tweets.

Sometimes the presentations are kind of dry; it doesn't capture your attention. So if you had a presentation that has some animation or something that would attract attention.

Leaders/managers. Employees value leaders and managers' communication roles and crave meaningful (often defined as face-to-face) time with them.

Increase face time with business unit presidents and those one degree separated from them.

Managers and team leaders should discuss internal communications within their team.

I want to hear from my group vice president more than once or twice a year.

Bring back the old fashioned staff meeting with immediate boss.

Better communication from my supervisor. He shares nothing with us, except posting some things on the time clock.

More face-to-face communications with immediate level(s) of leadership.

⑤ Provide opportunities to participate

Employees understand that receiving information is not enough. They don't simply want to be spectators; employees expect to take part in communication.

Two way. Often communication stops when the email is sent or the story is posted on the intranet. Employees want to share their opinions, ask questions and receive feedback in real time.

More live conversation meetings—talk to us; don't just send emails. The town hall was a good concept to do this.
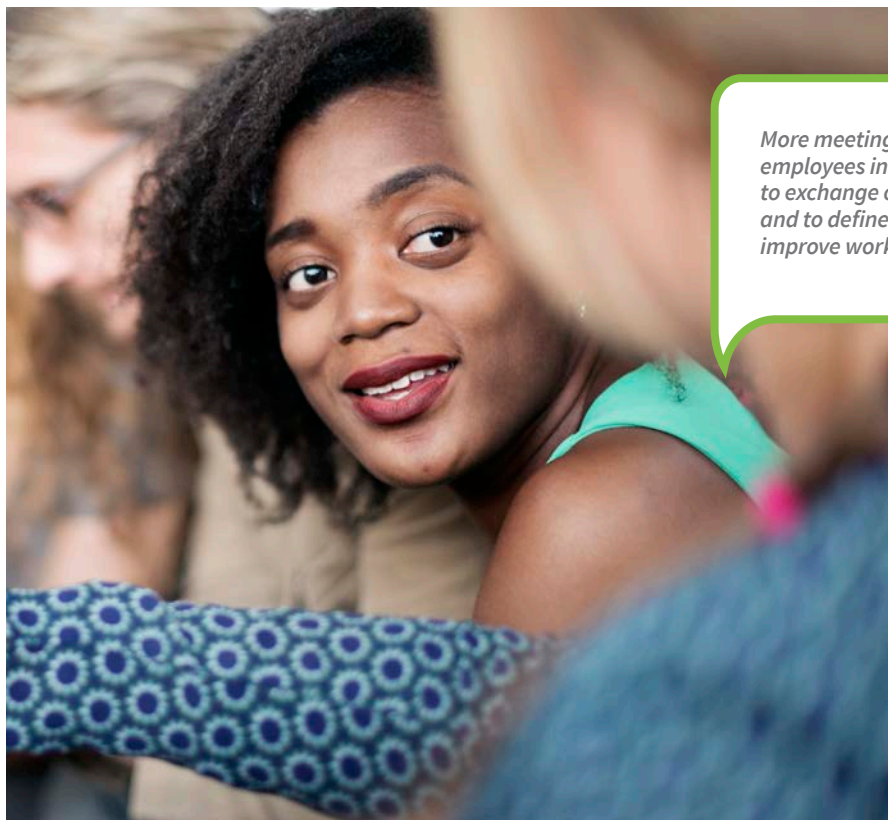
More meetings with employees in order to exchange opinions and to define ways to improve work.

Departments tend to operate in silos. I would encourage inter-department communications.

Increasing interaction at town halls

A small division of a large pharmaceutical company wanted to foster a culture of collaboration among its 300 employees. We knew the perfect place to start: town halls.

Over the years, these quarterly meetings had become a place to dump information. We saw an opportunity to transform them into monthly roundtable discussions, where employees could ask candid questions, collaborate with colleagues and problem-solve with peers and leaders.

We helped leaders build shorter, more interactive agendas, leverage technology (like PollEverywhere) to engage employees and create a safe space for employees to talk about their challenges, successes and questions.

The result? Post-meeting surveys of attendees revealed:
- 100% agreed that attending the meetings was a good use of their time
- 100% agreed that the meeting gave them an opportunity to participate
- 74% felt more connected to their organization after attending town halls

Tool: How does your communication stack up?

Now that you understand what employees expect, how would you rate your communication?

Grab a recent communication channel, such as a brochure or an intranet article and rate it, using the nine dimensions below. Add your scores and compare your total with the key below.

Note: Question 2 is so important that you should double that score when you add the results.

How to interpret your results

If your total is…	What to do next
0 to 25	*Uh, oh. Time to rethink your communication. See page 15 for some quick wins and give us a call to chat through ideas.*
26 to 50	*Time to kick it up a notch. Take steps to enhance the communication you just rated. Start by making changes that will better meet employees' needs.*
51 to 75	*Keep up the good work! Look at the areas where you scored lower and decide on a few ways to improve.*
76 to 100	*You're a rock star! Want to work for Davis & Company?*

The super-fantastic Davis & Company employee-centric evaluation tool

Dimension	Select the number that best reflects how your communication aligns with each dimension					Transfer your score to this column
1 Information is segmented/ targeted (localized for the audience)	1 Not targeted	2	3	4	5 Customized for audience	
2 Content focuses on what it means to employees	1 Does not describe impact	2	3	4	5 How it affects employees/ company	Double your score for this question.
3 Explains what employees need to do	1 Action not clear	2	3	4	5 Action or next steps clear	
4 Uses navigation cues (bullets, links, subheads, callouts)	1 None	2	3	4	5 Multiple methods	
5 Includes opportunity(ies) for participation: comments, ratings feedback, submit a question	1 None	2	3	4	5 Multiple methods	
6 Content is easy to read and understand *Check the reading grade level of your copy with Microsoft Word*	1 12th grade	2	3	4	5 7th grade	
7 Uses clear language	1 Jargon, acronyms	2	3	4	5 Terms defined, explained	
8 Is short and to the point	1 Long, linear	2	3	4	5 Short, scannable, chunky	
9 Is candid and transparent	1 Good news, spin	2	3	4	5 Good news and bad	

How to meet employees' expectations

Think of employees as your customers

One of the essential ingredients is thinking of employees as your customers and understanding what they really need from communication—what we call "employee-centric communication." For employees, communication is most effective when it meets their needs and preferences. Don't forget how employees would improve communication.

The ideal state: Balance employee satisfaction with the organization's needs.

Organization's needs

Employee satisfaction

Before you communicate, answer these questions:

• What is the key thing employees need to know or do?

• Have I targeted the right group(s)?

• Have I explained what this means to each employee: what he/she needs to do differently and how the information applies to his/her job?

• Am I telling the whole story?

How can you listen to employees?

We're hoping that our research has inspired you to understand what is unique about your situation. Here are three ways to listen:

1. Conduct focus groups, interviews or a survey

2. Monitor questions submitted through key communication channels, such as the intranet or during a town hall

3. Observe how employees use communication tools, for example, is it easy to find what they need on the intranet?

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Step 2

Design communication with these 7 principles in mind

Need quick wins to improve your employee communication?

Here's how employees might describe our seven principles:

1 **Convenient** "Make it quick to read and easy to access. It also has to fit into my day when I have a few minutes to read or watch."

2 **Simple** "It takes more time if I have to figure it out. If something is complicated, decide what's important and remove the information that doesn't matter."

3 **Visual** "Can you explain it with an illustration or diagram? Think of a mall map: it makes it much easier to see the big picture and how everything fits together."

4 **Helpful** "Break it down for me. What are the two or three steps I need to complete?"

5 **Personalized** "Communication is more useful when I can picture how the information applies to my situation."

6 **Hands on** "I get a lot more out of asking questions than reading a 500-word article. Give my manager and leaders tools to help them have conversations with me."

7 **Fun** "I find communication more engaging when it's intriguing and unexpected."

The leaders in internal communication

We're Davis & Company, the employee communication experts. Since 1984, leading organizations have depended on us to reach, engage and motivate their employees. Our strategic mindset, creative spirit and practical know-how can solve your toughest communication challenges. Give us a call. We'd love to help.

To schedule a consultation, contact <u>Vaishali Benner</u> or call 1-877-399-5100.

Take employee communication to the next level

We can help you to:

• Make communication relevant to employees

• Create simple content

• Communicate in a timely manner

• Change how you communicate

• Give employees a voice

5 things to know about us

Global. We've created communication programs that reach employees across the world, in nearly every continent (but not, we admit, Antarctica).

Experienced. We have decades of experience in communicating change, initiatives, HR programs and policies, and many other topics.

Collaborative. Our favorite way of working is to meet with our clients and put our heads together.

Client-focused. Our mission is to help you solve your problems. To set you up for success. To make sure you get the recognition you deserve. (We think you get the picture.)

Acclaimed. We've won hundreds of awards and routinely earn the praise of clients and colleagues.

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