

Smart guide

Simplify complex information

5 steps to
build employee
understanding





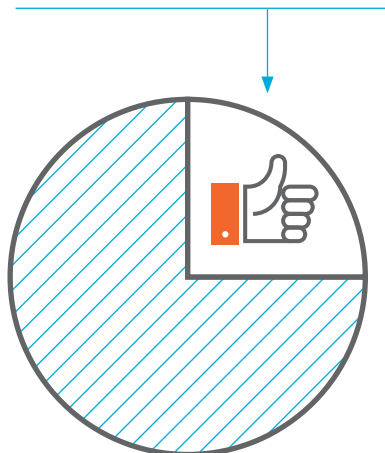
Do your employees really get it?

Unfortunately, when it comes to important issues, such as company strategy, HR policies and benefits, and new initiatives, the answer is often “No.” According to the 2015 Davis & Company Human Resources Communication Study:

Only **35%** of employees surveyed are happy with the HR information they receive.



And **less than 25%** of employees surveyed feel prepared to make the right decision about benefits, pay and performance management.



So what’s the problem?

Employees are frustrated with the communication they typically receive on these topics:

- ✓ **An organizational announcement** that goes on for three pages
- ✓ **A 50-slide presentation**—packed with data—from a recent management meeting
- ✓ **A brochure** on incentive compensation that’s full of technical terms, caveats and disclaimers

Simplifying the complex

What can be done to improve communication? In this Smart guide, we’ll describe a five-step process for taking complicated information and making it simple so that every employee knows what to do:

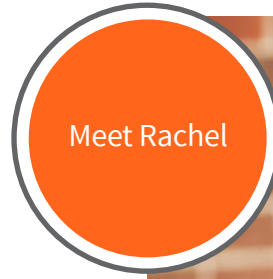
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The challenge: communicating company strategy

Rachel, a communication manager at Apex Manufacturing, is faced with a big challenge:

The new Apex CEO has drafted the **company's strategy** and wants to communicate this information to all employees. Division and function heads also contributed their priorities, some of which directly align with the CEO's strategy, while others are more loosely connected. The result is a confusing three-page document.



How should Rachel attack this challenge?

1 Analyze your audience

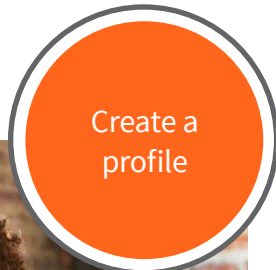
To begin the process of simplifying complex information, you need to understand your audience.

Why? The more you know about employees' habits, attitudes and preferences, the more successful you'll be at developing communication that gets people's attention.

How? Create a profile of employees to capture what you know about them. Include the following information:



- ✓ **Demographics**, such as average age, length of service, gender ratio
- ✓ **Geography**
- ✓ **Languages** employees speak
- ✓ **Job categories/roles**
- ✓ **How employees get information.** For example, do they have email access?
- ✓ **What else is happening** that employees care about. For example, how's business? Have there been layoffs or other disruptions?
- ✓ **How employees will be affected** by what you're communicating, and how they'll likely react to the issue.



The challenge

When she created the profile of Apex employees, Rachel asked a colleague in HR for demographic data to complete the picture. Here's what Rachel found:

- Average age:** 39
- Length of service:** 14 years
- Gender ratio:** 61% men, 39% women
- Located in:** U.S., Mexico and Canada
- Languages:** English, Spanish and French
- Roles:** Line jobs, management, plant office staff, headquarters staff

- Access:** 80% have limited email or electronic access
- Concerns:** Employees worry about the economy affecting the company and their facility
- Expected reactions:** Rachel reviewed employee survey and focus group data, and found something interesting. Employees are skeptical about strategic messages, since many of them have seen priorities—and their CEOs—come and go.

2 Set communication objectives

What's the most common mistake you can make in communicating complex information? Not being clear about what you want to accomplish. When you set communication objectives, your efforts become more focused and your message is clear.



Objectives also help you manage key stakeholders (“here’s what we’ll do”) and measure the effectiveness of your efforts.

To set objectives, determine:

- ✓ What you need employees to **know**. What knowledge will employees gain as a result of communication? What issues/topics will they understand?
- ✓ How employees’ **beliefs or attitudes** will change. Will employees become more confident in the direction of the company, for instance? Will they believe that a new compensation program offers better rewards?
- ✓ What employees will **do** when communication is successful. For example, will they focus more on customers? Enroll in long-term disability? Tell friends and family about a new service your company offers?



The challenge

Here are the objectives Rachel established for communicating the strategy:

In 90 days, employees will...

Know	Believe	Do
Understand the company strategy for this year	Believe they're doing the right things to ensure the company's success	Align their work with the focus of the company

3 Understand the issue

Let's say your boss hands you a lengthy PowerPoint presentation about a new initiative and asks you to help communicate it to employees.

What's the first thing you should do? Step away from the PowerPoint! Instead, take out a pad and write down questions employees might have about the initiative. Then figure out how to answer those questions.



We call this process “peeling the onion” because you need to de-layer a complex issue to fully understand it—and communicate it. Here's how:

- ✓ **Ask fundamental questions:** Who? What? When? Why? How?
- ✓ **Take a step back** and see the issue as part of the big picture. For example, if you're communicating about an initiative to cut travel costs, understand how it fits into broader cost-cutting or efficiency efforts.
- ✓ **Now zoom in and get really close.** Make sure you understand the inner workings of the issue. What do people do first? Next?
- ✓ **Ask whether this issue is like something else.** Could an analogy bring it to life? What familiar experience can help bring clarity to what might otherwise be a dense topic?
- ✓ **Finally, don't rest until you “get” it.** Our favorite question: “If you had to explain this to a new employee, what would you say?”

Ask fundamental questions



The challenge

The material the CEO gave Rachel was pretty complicated: the company strategy, surrounded by divisional and functional priorities that were not totally aligned. But Rachel had an idea about where and how she could find additional clarity. So she:

- **Reviewed available material,** including PowerPoint decks, a transcript from one of the CEO's video messages and an audio recording of a senior leader conference call.

- **Developed bullet points that attempted to tie all the priorities together.** Rachel knew this draft had holes, but she developed it to test assumptions and speed up her information-gathering process.
- **Conducted interviews with the CEO and three other senior leaders.** Because of deadlines, Rachel couldn't talk to everyone, so she chose four key leaders. In each interview, she shared the draft bullets, got feedback and asked as many targeted, probing questions as she could.

4 Frame your message

Now that you have a clear understanding of the issue you need to communicate, it's time to get your message on paper. Creating a **message frame** is a great way to organize your thoughts and ensure that your message is clear and consistent across all communication channels. Your message frame should begin with an elevator speech, the short answer (15–20 words) to the question, “What is this about?”



When creating your message frame, you should consider:

- ✓ **What do employees want to know?** What will employees find most interesting about this issue? How will they react to the issue?
- ✓ **What is your objective?** What will employees need to know, believe or do?
- ✓ **What's the news?** What's the big, new idea? What's in it for employees?

To make it easier for employees to understand your message, it's important to keep your writing short and simple.

Here are a few tips for writing your message:

- ✓ **Use small words that mean something,** not big words that confuse people. Avoid buzzwords, such as “human capital management” or “strategic imperatives.”
- ✓ **Define technical terms** (if you have to use them) and spell out acronyms/initialisms.
- ✓ **Keep sentences and paragraphs short:** no more than 15 words for a sentence, or three to four sentences in a paragraph.

Not this word	This word
Leverage	Use
Synthesize	Combine
Synergize	Share

Focus on what employees need to know



The challenge

Rachel created a simple key message frame to ensure communication about the new strategy was clear and consistent.

Elevator speech	Our strategy guides our decisions and actions, so everyone is contributing to our goal: improving the customer experience.		
Key messages	Our strategy includes four company-wide priorities focused on improving the customer experience.	Our strategy will help us grow our company and offer associates more opportunities to expand their careers.	As an associate, it's your job to know the strategy and incorporate it into your performance management plan.
Supporting points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting point Supporting point 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting point Supporting point 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting point Supporting point

5 Show what you mean with visuals

Using visuals is a powerful way to simplify complex information. After all, half the human brain is devoted (directly or indirectly) to vision. And we process images 60,000 times faster than text.

Visuals can:

1. Help employees **navigate** dense information
2. Convey **complicated** ideas
3. **Emphasize** key messages
4. Efficiently **consolidate** information



Develop an infographic

One great way of dealing with very complicated information is to create an infographic. Infographics help present information, data or knowledge in a simple, meaningful way. They are particularly useful for explaining a complicated process or how different parts of a program work together.

Graphics also inspire dialogue because they provide a common reference point. They help employees remember the content, and talk about it in the future. (By contrast, did you ever hear an employee say, “Remember that spreadsheet?” Probably not.)



Visuals are a powerful tool

The challenge

Rachel worked with her design team to create a simple graphic to show how all the pieces of the strategy fit together. This way, no matter which element someone was addressing, employees would always understand “the big picture.”

APEX STRATEGY



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 [Vaishali Benner](#) or call 1-877-399-5100.

Change how you simplify complex information.

We can help you to:

- Understand your audience
- Clarify what you want to accomplish
- Ask fundamental questions
- Create a message frame
- Help employees navigate dense information

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.